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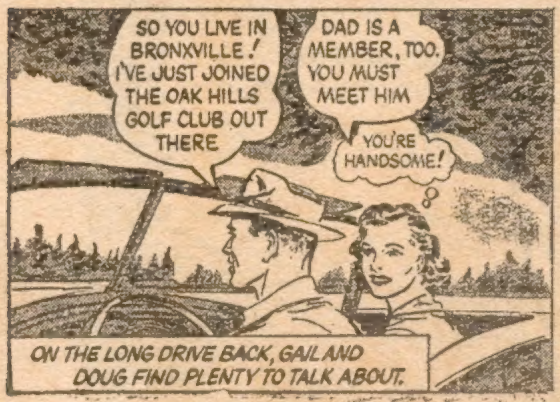
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19th YEAR

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

Vol. 18, No. 9 | Oct., 1952

Robert O. Erisman
Editor
Arthur Lane
Associate

★ ★ 3 BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVELS ★ ★

"HE'S NO MANBREAKING McCAFFREY!" 12
by Clifton Adams

If the bloodthirsty carpetbaggers chose not to hand him, Rowel McCaffrey knew why, and it wasn't from fear he instilled. They remembered his brother Lije's fearsome legend, was the reason, and Lije's surety to come from the grave and gut-blast every last lying jumprope juror!

THE BLOOD-LETTING AT CANYON CREEK 60
by Lewis B. Patten

In '85 they strung up a horsethief, in '87 a killer. And now they hustled Ed Lowe toward the same tree, because he was responsible for every cattleman on Canyon Creek being wiped out. But Frank Shasta knew that the trouble here could never be stopped with a hangnoose...

MULE DEAL 86
by Joseph Chadwick

Thirty thousand head, the Major wanted, and there was money to be made shipping mules to the Boer War. But would Dan Naylor also have to sell his soul to a dangerous woman, and his gun to the highest bidder?

★ ★ 4 CRACK SHORT STORIES ★ ★

THE COMANCHEROS ..... **Noel L. Loomis 6**

THE DESPERADOS ..... **John Prescott 45**

The kid had heard about men like this—he didn't figure he'd ever cross the trail of any of them though....

WILD RANGE ..... **Harold F. Cruickshank 46**

When the man creature invaded the rugged hunting grounds of the wild ones, he had to expect a savage showdown!

GUNHAWK ..... **Jonathan Craig 56**

Faxton was a gunfighter, accustomed to taking what he wanted by force. What he wanted now was a girl....

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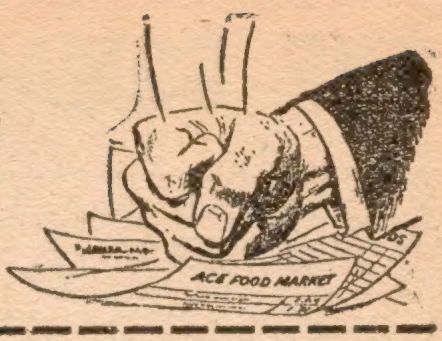

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THE COMANCHEROS

by NOEL M. LOOMIS

IN CHIHUAHUA in the summer of 1873 it was dry and hot, as it was always dry and hot in Chihuahua, but this year the dust lay inches deep in the crooked streets among the brown adobe houses. In the little plaza next to the church a number of brown-faced men were organizing a *conducta,* and Juan Calvo watched with a great deal of envy, for Juan was eighteen and was not married."

"*A donde va?*" Juan asked a man who was wrapping the shaft of a *carreta* with a strip of wet rawhide.

The man straightened up and looked at him. His name, as far as Juan had ever heard, was "Fulano de tal"—so-and-so, and when he straightened up he was tall. He wore a buckskin shirt laced only at the throat, buckskin pants, and moccasins. "To the Llano Estacado, as usual," he said, "to trade with the Indians."

Juan ran his hand over the big wheel that had been sawed as a cross-section from a huge cotton-wood log; there was no piece of iron in the entire cart; it was all wood, held together with rawhide that dried and shrank in the sun and hardened until it was like iron. He looked up at the tall man who was maybe part Mexican, part Indian, part gringo—who knew what?

"I would like to go," Juan said.

The tall man moved to continue wrapping the shaft. "Why don't you?"

"No money," said John. "There is never any money."

"Tell you what I'll do." The tall man stood up, holding the end of the rawhide in one hand. He looked searchingly at Juan. "I've got an old cart from three years ago. It's not much good, but it can be patched up. You fix it, and I'll get you a burro and some made goods and you can go along. You give me half of the profits."

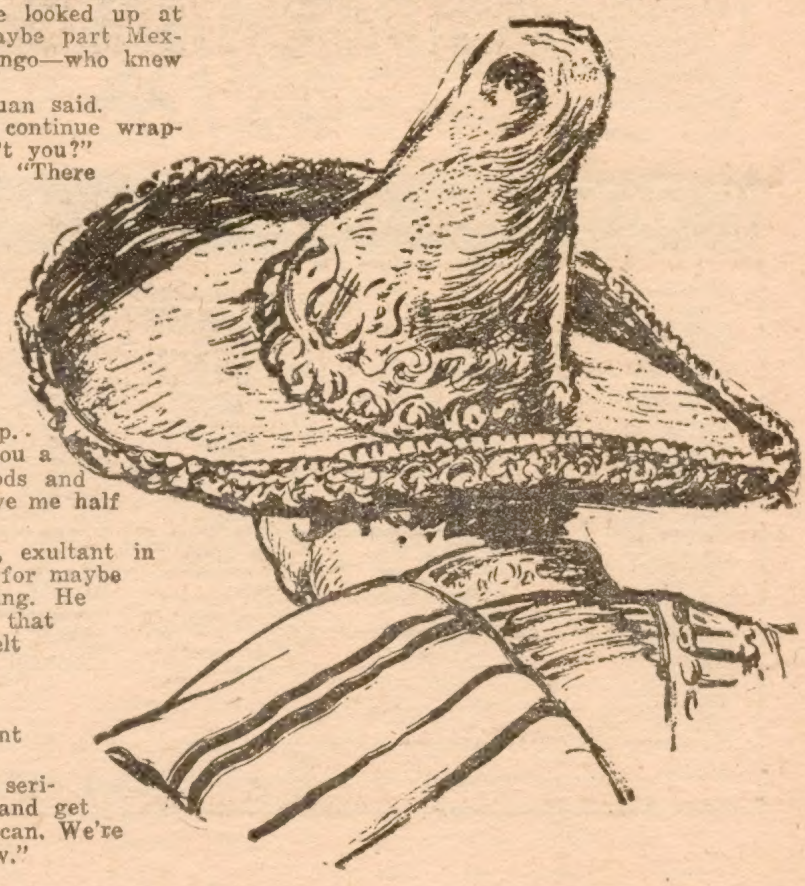
"*Bueno!*" shouted Juan, exultant in his heart—but scared too, for maybe the gringo was only fooling. He looked at the long knife that swung from the gringo's belt in a sheath made of a buffalo calf's tail turned inside out, with the tuft of hair hanging as ornament at the bottom.

But Fulano de tal was serious. "Go tell your folks, and get back here as soon as you can. We're leaving day after tomorrow."

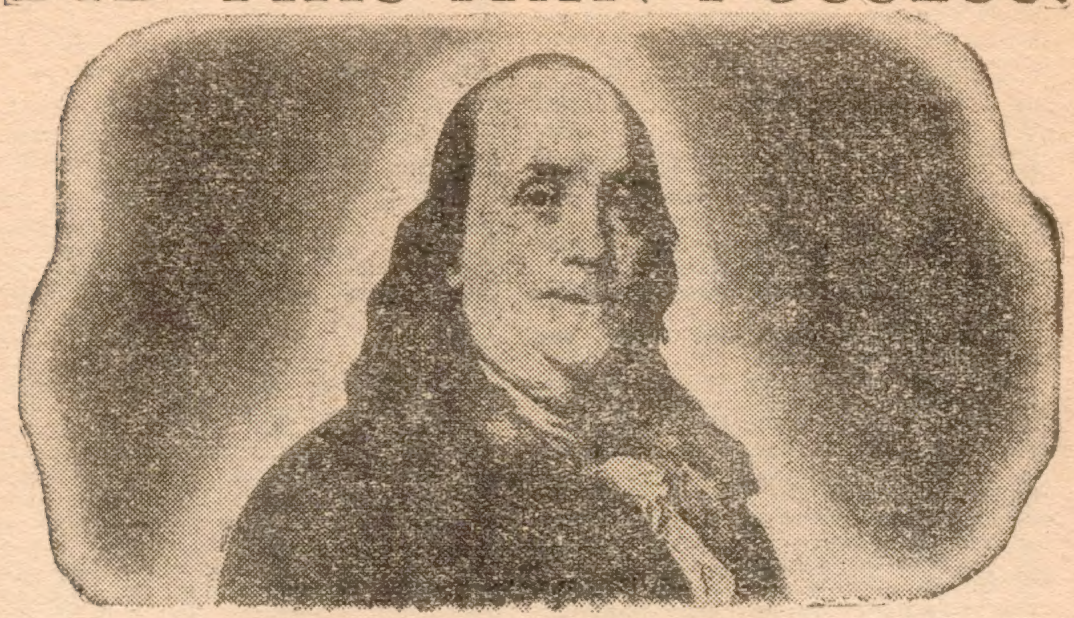
Juan ran home, scattering squealing pigs and chickens and naked brown children before him. He reached his father's house and remembered to stomp the dust from his straw sandals. He took off his straw peon's hat. As soon as he made some money he would throw away the straw hat and buy a felt hat like the great-brimmed hat worn by Fulano de tal. But now he stepped very quietly inside and placed his straw hat on its proper peg.

THERE WAS a place for him around the pot of chile and frijoles. His father was there, and his nine or ten brothers and sisters—all younger. Juan picked up a paper-thin tortilla and shaped it into a half-roll with his thumb and forefinger. He dipped up chile and frijoles with it, and the hot stuff felt good when it got into his stomach. Presently he leaned back and said importantly, "I am going north with the comancheros." (He pronounced it co-man-chayros).

(please turn to page 8)



WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

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His mother looked at him an instant. "The comancheros are no good, as everybody knows. They drink and fight and trade liquor and guns to the Indians—and many of them do not come back. You had better get married and raise a family," she said. "Soledad Nunez is already fourteen years old, and people are asking me if you are not going to be married and raise children like your father."

But Juan could not be stopped. He told them in glowing terms of the *conducta* that was to leave Chihuahua day after tomorrow, to travel through the land of the Mescaleros, up the great Pecos Valley to the north, where they would go into the United States from the west and trade with the Comanches and Kiowas and Cheyennes and Arapahoes.

"And what will you bring back?" his mother asked.

"Why, buffalo robes, and horses, and gold—of course!"

And such was Juan's enthusiasm that he omitted his customary siesta and went back to the plaza under the blazing sun, for he knew that Fulano de tal would be at work; there was that much gringo in him, and when the gringos set out to do something, they never stopped for heat or cold or anything but death. So Juan got back to the plaza and went to work on Fulano de tal's old cart. It was well weathered and worn, but there was nothing that could not be fixed with rawhide...

On the morning of the second day they set out on the long, dry trail north from Chihuahua. Fulano de tal said it was six hundred miles to the place where they would turn east into the Llano.

There were twenty-one men besides Fulano de tal and Juan—all of them hard-eyed and quick-fingered. The carts carried cotton and silk handkerchiefs, cheap dress goods, tin pans, butcher knives, jars of vermillion, needles, tin cups, and looking glasses, and some carried hard candy and pones of *pinole*—a Mexican bread.

They would get up early in the morning, have chile and frijoles and sometimes a bit of goat-meat; then they would back their burros into their carts and hitch them up and go forward, always to the north, traveling ten or fifteen miles a day across the hot sand and the desert, stopping in mid-afternoon, being very careful to find the water-holes. But some of these were dry, and they were forced to make a dry camp. Then they would have only the water in their leather canteens; Fulano de tal carried his in the intestine of a horse, as long as his arm and tied at both ends.

At some stages of the journey there were not even dry water-holes, and sometimes they had to go two nights without water. On these occasions the animals suffered—the horses most, the burros least.

Juan Calvo's straw sandals wore out, and Fulano de tal showed him how to make new ones of rawhide.

THEY CAME to the Rio Grande, and everybody filled their containers with water. They left El Paso and turned east until they reached the Pecos, and Fulano de tal warned Juan not to drink from it and not to let the burro drink. "It's poison," he said. "Alkali. Pecos water is so bad it'll kill a rattlesnake."

And indeed there were many skeletons of animals there, and some more recent carcasses, and dead buffaloes nidden under blowflies.

They went up the east side of the Pecos, traveling out a league or so from the river, and pulling down closer at night. "We're not so likely to run into Mescaleros if we keep out in the open," Fulano de tal said. "And at night they won't attack, for no Indian wants to run the risk of dying at night. His soul couldn't find its way to heaven—or whatever it is they believe in."

It was there that Fulano de tal got into an argument with a man who had two carretas and a horse to ride. The man was called Blanco, and Juan never knew whether he was Mexican or Indian or both, but he got liquored up on mescal from a small round keg one evening and wanted to fight. He started for Juan, but Juan's ran. Blanco ran after him, his hot, stinking breath on Juan's neck. Then Fulano de tal tripped Blanco, and Blanco pulled a knife from inside his shirt. Fulano de tal's knife came out of its buffalo-tail sheath; it was very long and thin and narrow, and sharp on both edges. For a while they circled; then Blanco lunged. Fulano de tal sidestepped; then he cut out Blanco's intestine with his bowie knife.

They buried Blanco in the hard sand; there were no rocks to pile on his grave. "The coyotes'll take care of him tonight anyway," Fulano de tal said.

"There should be a monument of some sort," said Juan, feeling bad because the fight had been over him.

Fulano de tal shook his head. "No marker. The Indians would find it and would know we were short a man. Besides, we wouldn't know what name to put on it."

"Wasn't his name Blanco?" asked Juan.

The tall man, cleaning the dried blood from his knife blade with a bunch of sawgrass, said casually, "Half the men in this outfit don't travel by their right names." He looked at Juan searchingly. "You don't know mine, do you?"

"No," said Juan, feeling very uncomfortable.

Fulano de tal slipped the knife into its sheath. "Don't ever ask," he said....

The next morning Fulano de tal divided up Blanco's goods among the comancheros; they drew lots for the extra carretas and

(*continued on next page*)

burros and the horse. Fulano de tal drew the horse but sold it to a Mexican named Aguilar. And Juan, growing wiser in the ways of men, knew why this was: so that the other comancheros would not see Fulano de tal on the horse and be reminded that he had killed its owner. The comancheros were hard-minded men and suspicious. Half-expecting death at every dawn, they were not afraid of it. Traveling in a country where no organized law was enforced, they recognized none. They had their own laws, which could be summed up in a sentence: "The race is to the strong and the quick and the man with the sharpest knife."

IT SEEMED they traveled an endless world of sand and heat. The Pecos offered occasional strips of cottonwood trees and small marshes of grass—white with dried alkali, but the comanchero train crawled on and on under the burning sun, and they did not seem to get anywhere, nor did the sun's heat lessen.

Finally one day they reached Bosque Rondo, a tiny town built in a cottonwood grove, and were joined by men from Santa Fe; some were Mexicans, but most were gringos, driving big four-wheeled wagons pulled by oxen or mules. Two gringos—one in a stiff business suit, one in an army uniform—came and talked to Ffulano de tal that night. They wanted him to drive a wagon for them, but Fulano de tal kept silent while they talked and watched the pot of *cafe* simmer in the ashes. Finally he arose and said, "No, gents, I'm on my own. If I make anything, it's mine. If I lose, I lose for myself." He told Juan later, "I don't like it. As usual, the gringos want to furnish the money and take the profits."

The next day they turned east into Comanche country. They stopped at a place called Mucha Que, where there was water.

"This is Texas," said Fulano de tal, and Juan frowned, for Texans and Mexicans had not been on very good terms since the Alamo.

"Don't worry," Fulano de tal said. "There won't be any gringos making trouble up here. The Indians rule the Llano, and the gringos are satisfied to let them have it."

"It's not a desert," said Juan. "It's not sand. There's plenty of good grass. The burros are getting fat."

Fulano de tal shook his head. "Grass, yes. Water, no."

It was near Mucha Que that Juan saw his first buffalo herd. It seemed there were millions of them, great shaggy brown heads and rounded backs, pounding along until the earth seemed to give forth a cavernous subterranean rumbling. They went by on both sides of the comanchero camp, and the earth trembled from the thunder of their mighty hooves. After it was over, Fulano de tal got up and said, "I brought a bottle of brandy from El Paso. Do you hombres feel like celebrating?" And they all, even Juan, got very drunk that night, for Fulano de tal was not the only one who had brought liquor from El Paso.

The next day Juan saw Indians. They came across the endless prairie in a straggled procession. They wore no war bonnets or feathers. Most of them were naked from the waist up. Some wore breech-cloths only; others wore buckskin leggings; all rode horses as if they had been born on horseback, and all carried bows and a quiver of arrows at their backs.

"Kiowas," said Fulano de tal, watching closely. "They got a bunch of horses and some steers."

Three of the Kiowas came up to the camp, and Fulano de tal went to meet them. One Kiowa said "*Tsei gya-ka'da-'a'da'.*"

But Fulano de tal shook his head. "No savvy Kiowa," he said, and made a motion with his hands.

The Kiowa grunted. Then he held the right hand, back outward, in front of his left breast, his fingers touching, knuckles bent a little; he moved his hand to the right and a little to the front.

Fulano de tal was watching him. Now he grinned. "He wants to sell a horse," he told Juan. He went into the cart and brought back a looking-glass. "This for a good horse," he said in sign language.

The Kiowa nodded solemnly. He started off toward the horses the Indians were loose-herding on the prairie. Fulano de tal followed.

Juan spoke up, "*Yo tengo—pinturas—por caballos.* I have flowered goods to trade for horses."

The Indians laughed among themselves. Finally one said in halting Spanish, "We have a nice paint pony for half a dozen loaves of *pinole*."

Juan thought that was pretty cheap, but he didn't waste any time. He closed the deal and delivered the bread. He went to get his horse. It had a brand on it.

"Come from below the Caprock," Fulano de tal said. "Ranchers running stock right up to the edge of the Llano."

"I thought we were to trade for buffalo robes," said Juan.

Fulano de tal shook his head. "Not any

(*continued on next page*)

more. Buffalo are getting scarce, for one thing. For another, there's more money in horses and cattle."

"The Indians must steal the animals from the ranchers."

"That isn't our lookout," said Fulano de tal. "We can take them back to New Mexico and sell them and no questions asked."

It was then the Kiowa came back to Juan and said, *"T'ou-adlk'ae."*

Fulano de tal shook his head.

The Kiowa held his hand cupped to his mouth, then his hand close to his forehead, palm outward, then moved his fingertips in a spiral.

Fulano de tal said to Juan, "He wants whisky."

"We haven't got whisky," said Juan. "And nobody else has given them whisky."

"They brought it along. The gringos from Santa Fe brought plenty of it. They hide it back in the hills and send the Indians after it when the deal is all finished. That's so the Indians won't be too near when they get the fire-water in them, because sometimes they try to steal their stock back again."

The Kiowa kept making signs with his hands. Fulano de tal sighed. "He says he'll take guns or ammunition instead. But we haven't got that kind of goods to trade them. I reckon we're out of step with the times, Juan."

"What shall I do?"

"Give him more bread—half a dozen more loaves. After this, we'll have to tell them—no whisky."

THEY HAD a good month of trading, especially after the moon came up full in September, for it was then the Comanches, the great horse Indians of the Plains, did their best raiding. But Fulano de tal was worried. "It's too organized," he told Juan. "A little stealing, a few raids, will get by—but not this wholesale business that's going on now."

They herded their stock back west across the Llano. There they sold it to a dealer from Las Vegas, and Juan's share of the profit made a very heavy bag of gold. Juan was elated.

"You going back home?" Fulano de tal asked, "and marry that Nunez girl?"

"No, I'm going to buy a big hat like yours, and get some sheep and run them in the mountains." He grinned. "There are Mexican girls here too."

Fulano de tal smiled. "I know one," he said, and shook hands. "I'm going up to Taos myself."...

That, in essence, is the story of the comancheros. The trade was going on from Santa Fe in 1765. It continued, with traders coming from Chihuahua, Santa Fe, and Las Vegas, to enter the Llano from the west; up the Canadian River from Fort Smith and up the Red River from New Orleans to enter the Llano from the east. There were a number of well established camps besides the one at Mucha Que, which probably was somewhere in the region of what is Muleshoe, Texas, today. A big camp was at Las Tecovas Springs, near what became Amarillo. Another was below the Caprock on the east, near what is now Quitaque.

One was in the Yellowhouse Canon. There was a traditional camp on Las Lenguas or Tongue River, where not only goods and stock but human slaves were bartered.

The comancheros at times carried on a flourishing business. When Charlie Goodnight went onto the Llano in 1876 he said their trails from north to south and east to west were broad and well worn.

But 1873, though neither Fulano de tal nor Juan knew it, was the last year for the comancheros, and the reason was not quite what Fulano de tal had guessed. The reason was the passing of the buffalo, for when the buffalo were gone the Indians could no longer subsist on the Llano. Thus the comanchero, representative of a rugged, individualistic breed, passed out of existence because of the near extinction of America's largest native animal. True, other factors would have brought the same result, but descendants of Juan Calvo and Fulano de tal (whatever his name really was), and of actual comancheros like Johnson the halfbreed, Joe Piedad, Jose Tefoya, and Casimero Romero (who built a house in Old Tascosa and then disappeared in New Mexico)—their descendants will tell you they would still be comancheros if there were still buffalo.

THE END

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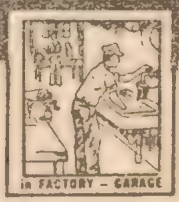

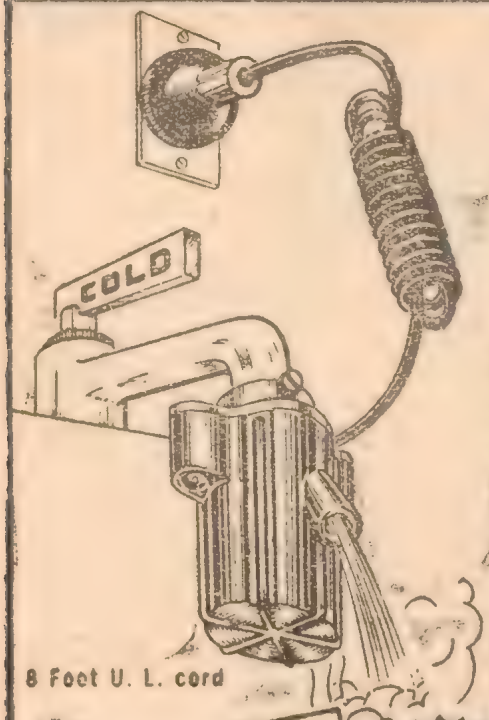

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"HE'S NO MANBREAKING

CHAPTER I

DEAD OR ALIVE

THE JUDGE was a Northerner, lean, hungry-eyed, confident that this case would end like all the others, in a conviction. He had select-

★ ★ **THIS QUIET KID — A BLOOD-SON OF THE**
★ ★ **LLANO COUNTY? BRAND NEW, LEAD-**

McCAFFREY!" by CLIFTON ADAMS

Rowel fired twice, stopping abruptly and aiming quickly.

If the bloodthirsty carpetbaggers chose not to hang him, Rowel McCaffrey knew why, and it wasn't from fear he instilled. They still remembered his brother Lije's fearsome legend, was the reason, and Lije's surety to come from the grave and gut-blast every last lying jumprope juror!

ed his jury carefully—twelve weak men who found it both profitable and healthy to side with the carpetbaggers.

This was the judge's chance to prove once and for all where the power lay in Llano County. He looked at Rowel McCaffrey, the defendant, and smiled

TOUGHEST, DEADLIEST COLT-CLAN IN SLAMMING BOOK - LENGTH NOVEL! ★ ★ ★ ★

thinly. The "scalawag" jurors began filing out of the back room, to take their places on the plank benches that served as the jury box in the Llano County courthouse.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

Ike Bascome, foreman of the jury and saddlemaker in the county seat town of White River, stood up. He too was smiling. With a word he was able to send one of the notorious, fearsome McCaffreys to the gallows—and his slow grin said it would be a pleasure.

"The defendant will rise," the judge said, "and hear the verdict."

Rowel stood up slowly, glancing around the court room for someone he knew. He spotted Bass Jordan, the Box-M ramrod, and one or two Box-M riders who had showed up out of curiosity. Not much of a showing, Rowel thought wryly.... Now if it had been Lije here on trial, things would have been different. The whole ranch would have come in force.

As he stood there waiting for the judge to go on, Rowel felt the strange mixture of hostility and anxiousness in the crowded room. The spectators hadn't decided yet which they hated more, the McCaffreys or the carpetbaggers. They hadn't known Jess Neeley long enough to feel any personal loss after Rowel had killed him. Neeley, it was rumored, had a bad name as a gunman over in the New Mexico country, but nobody was sure about that, and nobody was interested in proving it. Bad name or not, the man had been working for Clay Vought's land company, and that alone was enough to throw the small ranchers' sympathy on the side of the prosecution.

But the town people, the people who stood to gain little or nothing in Clay Vought's fight against the McCaffreys, were still undecided. The carpetbaggers, and the State Police, and the iron heel of military rule by Union soldiers—those were the things that they had come to hate even more than the McCaffreys.

"How does the jury find the defendant?" the judge asked. "Guilty or not guilty?"

ROWEL McCAFFREY let his gaze settle on the jury foreman. Ike Bascome was a thin, sharp-eyed little man who had got rich during the war by selling faulty leather goods to the Confederate cavalry. Rowel caught those ferret eyes and held them with his gaze. He could break Ike Bascome with his bare hands, like a terrier snapping a rat's back. And he would do it, his eyes said. Or Duke, his younger brother, would.

He let Bascome see what he was thinking, and the little fellow began to shuffle uncomfortably. The McCaffrey name still had the power to strike fear in a man like that. It occurred to Rowel that perhaps the judge had picked his jury *too* well: he had picked men without the guts, perhaps, to back their own convictions. Bascome's smile disappeared as he glanced nervously at the other jurors.

"How find you?" the judge asked impatiently. "Guilty or not guilty?"

Lije could have handled that jury, Rowel couldn't help thinking. One look from Lije, and Bascome would have known Lije would kill him, if he had to come from the grave to do it. Instinctively, Rowel tried to recall Lije's stern, rock-like expression and assume it—

Bascome seemed to be having trouble with his speech. He wiped his face and the back of his sweaty neck. He tried to look away from Rowel and pull himself together, but a sudden fear had caught and held him frozen. *There was no mistaking that look of Rowel McCaffrey's. The McCaffreys were big men and powerful in Llano County.* And Ike Bascome was a little man, greedy, with a swath of yellow up his backbone. His money and position as jury foreman couldn't change that.

The judge made another impatient sound, but the courtroom didn't notice. All eyes were fixed on Rowel and the foreman. "I'll kill you, Ike," Rowel said without a sound. "I'll snap your scrawny body across my knees like a piece of cardwood, if you try to hang me." The words were said only with his eyes, but a shout couldn't have been more effective. Rowel darted glances at the other jurors. He was sure that, in the safety of the jury room, they had made up their minds to hang him. But it was different now.

THEY WERE beginning to wonder how much protection they could expect from the carpetbag government. Indecision began to show in their eyes. And what about the other McCaffreys: Duke, or the old man, or maybe even Lije come back from the missing—would they hunt them down and somehow carry out Rowel's unspoken threat? They looked at each other, and then at Ike Bascome, the foreman. The decision they had made in the jury room no longer counted. They were making up their minds all over again.

At last Ike Bascome broke his gaze away, but it was an effort and it left him weak and more sweaty than ever. Rowel told himself to relax, that it was all over now. Bascome and the other jurors didn't have the guts to invite the vengeance of the McCaffreys. But, perversely, he felt no satisfaction inside him. It had not been Rowel McCaffrey that had caused them to falter in their determination to see him hang. It had been Lije, his brother. *The ghost of Lije,* Rowel thought bitterly, *still was who they respected and feared.*

The judge, shrill with impatience, demanded once more that the foreman give the verdict.

Bascome looked at his hands. They were shaking. He wiped them on his pants and put them out of sight behind him.

"Not guilty," he mumbled.

For a moment the court room was silent. The judge sat stunned, waiting for someone in the jury to protest. But no one did. All the faces seemed relieved that Ike had reversed their original verdict. Suddenly, a Box-M man in the back of the room whooped, and the uproar started.

The lawyer grasped Rowel's hand and pumped it heartily. "I knew you didn't have anything to worry about, Rowel! No jury in the world could have hung you on that killing charge."

Rowel almost said, "You're a goddamn liar. You gave me up for dead two weeks ago." But he changed his mind, only murmuring, "Thanks. Send your bill to the Box-M and you'll get your pay."

As he pushed his way through the crowd, some of the town people pounded his back and reached for his hand. So happy were they at seeing the carpetbaggers take a licking that they forgot for a moment that, in the White River country, it was an unforgivable social error to appear on friendly terms with a McCaffrey. The ranchers in the room sat still in silent anger. Neeley had worked for Clay Vought, and Vought was working for their own welfare. The killing of Neeley, as far as they were concerned, was a direct attack on them. The first shot of the war.

AT LAST, pushing closer to the doorway, Rowel saw the big bearded face grinning quietly at him from the rear of the room. Bass Jordan, the Box-M foreman, shoved the crowd aside and took Rowel's arm.

"You might as well be hanged," he said, "'as trampled to death in this mob." He cleared a path with his two tremendous arms and they made their way outside to the plankwalk.

Rowel forced a grin. "Thanks, Bass. Have you seen my brother anywhere?"

"He was down to the White House bar, the last I saw of him," Bass Jordan said. "Probably he's still there. You'd think your own brother would be interested enough to come out and

see if you was going to get hanged or not."

Rowel laughed, but the sound seemed hollow. "Not Duke," he said. "Come on, we'll gather him up and get to the ranch."

They started moving up to the far end of White River's main street, aware of the stares that followed them. Occasionally a figure would step forward to shake hands and offer congratulations. Bass Jordan remained silent through it all, until they had worked their way out of the crowd.

"They're your friends today," he said, "because you bested the carpetbaggers. But wait till tomorrow. They'll be on your back, like they was before."

Rowel grinned slightly. The big foreman always expected the worst. "Let's wait till tomorrow and see," he said. "How are things on the Box-M?"

Bass Jordan grunted. "I guess all right. Duke's not worth a damn, though, as a ranch hand." He considered something briefly in his mind. "And Clay Vought's startin' another fuss about that north range of ours. He says the State law says that the land's supposed to be opened again for resettlement. He says you haven't got any legal right to that range—nor to the White River water that the Box-M always considered its own. He claims it's all supposed to be open range."

Rowel snorted. "Vought's crazy if he thinks he can run through a deal like that. The State gave that land to the Captain when he came down from Virginia and settled the place."

Jordan said soberly, "That's what I always thought, but Vought and the ranchers claim the State grant is good only if you settle the land and make improvements. During the war he claims that no improvements were made and the land wasn't settled, and that throws it back on the book as open range."

Rowel couldn't take that seriously. Vought's land company had been pecking away at the Box-M for more than a year, making all kinds of claims that they couldn't back up. He said, "Is a man supposed to fight a war and make improvements on his land at the same time? Forget it, Bass. Vought and the small ranchers have lost out at every turn. They couldn't even get a carpetbag jury to stick with them."

Deep thought formed creases between the foreman's eyes. But he didn't say anything else....

THEY FOUND Duke in the White House bar, sitting at a table with a saloon girl. Duke was the youngest of the three McCaffrey boys—not old enough to have fought for the Confederacy, but old enough to remember many of the quiet men of Texas who had ridden off to fight in strange lands, and had not returned. He had grown up in an atmosphere of quiet violence and hate, and it had left its mark on him. "The Wild One," people called him, when referring to the youngest member of the McCaffrey clan.

He was sitting now, tilted back in a cane-bottom chair, with his arm thrown carelessly around the girl's shoulder. He grinned thinly as Rowel and Bass Jordan came in.

"This is a devil of a place for you to be," Rowel said, "when half the carpetbaggers in Texas are trying to hang your brother."

Duke half rose, still smiling that thin smile of his, then he sat down again. "Can you think of a better place?" he asked mildly. "Good liquor, pretty women. Anyway, I knew they wouldn't hang you. If they'd tried it, old Lije would have killed every damn mule's son of them, even if he had to come from the grave to do it."

Rowel stiffened. Those were almost exactly the same words he had thought while Ike Bascome had been changing his mind at the trial. *Dead or alive,* he thought, *it's still Lije who runs the*

Box-M. Even Duke, my kid brother, accepts it.

CHAPTER II

HE HASN'T THE GUTS

ROWEL SAID stiffly, "We're going back to the ranch. Get your horse, and Bass and I will meet you down by the livery barn."

Duke shoved his chair back lazily. He was reluctant to leave, but he still recognized Rowel as the figurehead boss of the Box-M. If Rowel was not a man of Lije's stature, at least he was a man who could cut off Duke's allowance, and his credit in White River saloons. Duke patted the girl's cheek. "Don't go away, honey," he grinned. "I'll be back before long."

Rowel actually looked at the girl for the first time. She was surprisingly pretty for a honkatonker—part Mexican, he guessed, but his inspection didn't go beyond that. Saloon girls were Duke's playthings—Rowel let them alone. Rowel had his own ideas of what a McCaffrey's lady should be like, and a honkatonker didn't fit into that idea, not even a pretty one.

At the livery corral, Rowel watched as the wrangler brought out the two horses that Bass Jordan had brought into town with him—one for himself and one for Rowel.

"It looks like I was the only one that was worried about the trial," Rowel said dryly. "Did it occur to you that you might have to lead that extra horse back empty-saddled?"

The big foreman smiled. "I figured I could load the critter with a few sacks of feed, if they really decided to hang you."

Rowel laughed briefly. Bass Jordan was a good man—a good friend without being over-friendly. The foreman and his wife had come with the Captain on that first trip from Virginia, and he had been with the Box-M ever since. A stranger couldn't tell him from one of the family. His wife was buried in the family graveyard, and his two daughters had the run of the Box-M, as if they had been the daughters of Captain McCaffrey himself. The big man straightened and looked around as Rowel finished cinching up.

"Now what's happened to that fool brother of yours?"

"Probably still saying good-bye to the saloon girl," Rowel said, stepping into the stirrup and swinging up to the saddle. "We'll ride by the White House and roust him out."

Jordan grunted. He liked the McCaffreys, all of them, and he never admitted to himself that he favored one over the other. But he had to admit that Duke gave the family more than his share of trouble. He swung up to the saddle and silently sided Rowel down the dusty street again, in the direction of the White House bar.

THE WHITE HOUSE was a combination hotel-saloon-gambling hall; a two story frame building that had been painted white once but the sun and wind had taken care of most of that. Rowel handed his reins to Bass as they reached the place, saying, "I'll be out with the kid directly, Bass. Just wait for me here."

He broke through the swinging batwings, into the saloon, expecting to see Duke still sitting where he had left him. But almost instantly he saw that something was wrong. The kid was standing beside the table, holding the girl to one side with an outstretched arm. His other hand, his right, was cupped rigidly near the butt of his .45, and facing him was Clay Vought.

The room was quiet—tight with that strange silence that always seems to move in just before an explosion.

Without turning his head, Duke said, "Stay out of it, Rowel. I want to see if this gent's got guts enough to back up a threat."

Instinctively, Rowel's hands brushed his thighs for the feel of his pistols. But they were not there. He hadn't thought to arm himself after being freed. He didn't know what the argument was about, but in one quick glance Rowel could see that Duke didn't stand a chance if it came to shooting. Two of Clay Vought's men were standing over near the bar, ready to back him up if the kid made a wrong move.

Rowel came forward slowly. "This is no time to get into trouble, Duke," he said calmly. "We've had enough trouble to last a while."

Vought smiled thinly. He was a pale, thin man, wearing what amounted to a gambler's uniform—black broadcloth coat, white ruffled shirt, a silver-mounted .45 in a handsome handworked holster. He saw that Rowel was unarmed, and that pleased him. He said pleasantly, "Rowel, you'd better get your kid brother out of here before he gets hurt."

Duke spoke without turning.

"He was shootin' off his mouth about how the McCaffreys were done for in White River."

Vought's smile widened. "And I'm right," he said. "For a long time you McCaffreys have figured White River was your own private playground. You're holding onto a half a million acres that don't belong to you. It's open range, that's all the Box-M is, and you might know that now. And I'll tell you something else so you can start getting used to it," he added. "I'm going to start moving herds onto your north range. The Vought Land Company has organized the small ranchers and we're taking your north range for grazing."

Rowel laughed scornfully. "Sure, our north range might be free land in the books, but it would be worthless without the water of White River. And that water hole is McCaffrey's by State grant. If your cattle start moving in on my water I'll give my riders orders to shoot every strange brand they see. Go ahead, move in on our north range, Vought, if you think it will do you any good without water."

FOR A MOMENT Vought didn't say anything, but he never lost that smile of his. "Maybe," he said finally, "you've got a little surprise coming, Rowel. In the meantime just warn this kid brother of yours to stay away from other people's property." He glanced at the girl, the same girl Duke had been sitting with before, to give the statement meaning.

The kid made an angry sound, but Rowel caught his arm before he could do anything foolish. "We're going, Duke," he said evenly.

Duke turned, looking at him darkly. "I never thought I'd see a McCaffrey back down from a fight," he said hotly.

Angrily, Rowel grabbed his arm and shoved him toward the door. "Don't be a damned fool."

He realized immediately that he had done the wrong thing. He needed Duke on his side. He needed all the people on his side that he could get—but it was too late to change anything now. He added quietly, "Go on, kid. We'll talk it out later."

Duke walked stiffly toward the door, but his eyes said that one day he was going to stop taking orders from a man who had no right to give orders in the first place. There was the small sound of laughter as Rowel followed his brother out of the place.

It was no great surprise to see that Bass Jordan had left the horses at the hitching rack and was waiting for them just outside the batwings, his saddle Winchester cradled lightly in his arms. As they came out, Rowel could see the foreman take a deep breath of relief and let it out slowly.

"It was too quiet in there," he said by way of explanation. "I don't trust saloons when they're too quiet."

Rowel forced a quick smile. "The trouble's over," he said. "If you could call it that."

They waited for Duke to get his

horse at the far end of the rail, then the three of them wheeled in the street and headed north toward the Box M.

There was a story about the way the Box-M got its name. When Bass Jordan and old man McCaffrey came West looking for grazing land, they got as far as White River and they knew that was it. In those days buffalo grass was almost belly deep in some of the gentle draws, and they knew that they would never find better grazing land, no matter if they went all the way to California. The old man hadn't been so old in those days before the war. He'd had big ideas—wild ideas, some people said—but in his mind he could see thousands of head of cattle grazing there, using the whole northern part of Texas for their pasture if they wanted it.

So that was the way the old man laid out his spread. He used the southern boundary of No Man's Land for his northern line, from the mouth of White River to Apache Rock on the west, with the Canadian River roughly forming the southern boundary. On the spot, with a mesquite switch, he scratched the box-like map of his claim, and then put a big block M in the middle. It had been the Box-M ever since.

THOSE FIRST years before the war had been hard ones, with Comanches raiding the foundation herd by the light of every moon. In the tiny two-room ranch house Rowel had been born, and so had Lije, the other brother. Duke had come later, after the Box-M had begun to prosper and a new ranch house had been built. And back of the main ranch buildings there was a little shed, used as a saddle shed now, and that had been Bass Jordan's first home on the Box-M. He had declined the invitation to live with the McCaffreys in their own house, as he still declined the same invitation every month or so. He had a larger place now, and it was there that his two daughters were born, and his wife had died; and it was there that he would live as long as there was a Box-M.

The old man had guts, Rowel admitted. Ranching hadn't been easy in those days. But, for that matter, it wasn't easy now either.

They rode, the three of them, down the side of a dry wash, and up the other side toward a clump of scrub oak. Bass Jordan carefully looked straight ahead and said nothing, because this was the place where Rowel had killed a man. Duke looked about thoughtfully, then slouched in his saddle and began to roll a cigarette. For a moment he had forgotten to be angry with his brother about what had happened in the saloon.

They were still a little surprised at what he had done, Rowel thought. He had always been an easy-going sort of person before the old man had made him a partner in the Box-M. He had never had Lije's dash and color, nor Duke's handsomeness and wild disposition. So they were still a little surprised that he had faced down a known killer, shot it out and won. Maybe they were wondering what he would do next.

What would they think, Rowel thought, *if they knew that I was wondering the same thing?*

Rowel knew perfectly well that he would be in jail right now, waiting for the hangman's rope, if it wasn't for the fact that he was a McCaffrey. Not because he was *Rowel* McCaffrey, but because he was the *Captain's son. Lije's brother.*

ONCE ROWEL had supposed that, in time, he would be able to step out of the shadow cast by his famous brother. But it hadn't worked that way. Almost ten years had passed since Lije had been reported missing, maybe dead, and it was still the same. It was Lije's ghost that still held the power to make the McCaffrey name feared in Texas. The family, especially the old man, still expected the ranch to be run Lije's way, although his name was never mentioned any more. That was the way it always had been. And always would be, it

seemed like. Rowel was tired of fighting it—tired of trying to do things his own way when they never seemed to satisfy or work out.

Maybe, he thought, that was the reason he finally buckled on a pair of pistols that day when he heard that part of the herd was being raided on the north range. It was a new thing for him. He had never worn pistols, except in the war where he had learned to shoot as well as the next man. He had seen enough killing in the Wilderness, and Shiloh, and a lot of other places, to last him for a good long spell—forever, he had thought. But that day he had buckled on pistols because that was what Lije would have done, and there by the clump of scrub oak he had killed Jess Neeley, one of Vought's men, who was trying to get a running iron on a pair of Box-M calves.

Well, Rowel thought, it was over now. It was just one of those things that is bound to happen if you're a rancher, and he had taken care of it the way any good rancher would have done.

They came onto the Box-M from the east, and topping a small rise they looked down on the sprawling ranch house and the many outbuildings and corrals. Instinctively, Rowel's gaze went beyond the buildings, across the flat land to a small knoll north of the ranch house, where a lonely figure sat a big red horse. Rowel reined his horse around and spoke over his shoulder to the foreman.

"Bass, you and Duke go on down and let the folks know I'm all right. I'm going around by the knoll and talk to the Captain."

Bass Jordan shrugged. Duke straightened in his saddle, as if he were about to say something. But he changed his mind. They sat there for a minute, watching Rowel swing around the outbuildings.

Duke rolled a cigarette and studied it thoughtfully before hunting for a match. Then he spat. "If it had been Lije, Vought would be wearing a bullet in his belly." He laughed quickly, but with no humor. "Rowel hasn't got the guts to run a ranch like the Box-M."

Bass Jordan stiffened slightly. They never mentioned Lije's name on the Box-M. The old man didn't allow it.

CHAPTER III

LIJE'S JOB

BUT LIJE was still in their minds, Rowel knew. He could see it in their eyes every time they looked at him, and he could almost hear them thinking: *He'll never be the man Lije was.* Lije, the dashing and colorful one of the family. Lije, quick to make friends, quick to fight....Lije, the old man's favorite son.

They said the old man never got over it when Lije joined Davis' First Texas Cavalry, U.S. Volunteers, and fought against his own blood kin in the Confederacy. Some people said old man McCaffrey—or "Captain" McCaffrey, as they called him now—had become a little "teched" on the subject, because it was common knowledge in the Panhandle country that the old man had set great store by his second son. Rowel was not envied when he came home from the war to try to get the Box-M on its feet again.

That was to be Lije's job. Nobody knew that better than Rowel. Rowel had been too early to receive much attention from his father—the old man had been too busy fighting grass fires, and Indians, and the blinding snow storms that came in the winter, and dust in the summer, to pay much attention to his oldest son. But by the time Lije came along he had more leisure. From the very first the old man had begun teaching Lije what the Box-M meant and how to take care of it. The Box-M was to be Lije's ranch when the old

man decided to retire. There was never any mistake about that.

But it hadn't worked out that way. It had all changed the day Lije made his decision to fight with the Union Army, and the Box-M be damned. Rowel often remembered that day, because that was the day the old man had disowned his favorite son and had made Rowel a full partner in the ranch. And that was the day, Rowel supposed, that he first began to feel the resentment all around him. *He'll never be the man Lije was...* The fact that they might despise Lije for what he had done didn't change that thought that was forever in their minds.

Reaching the knoll where the old man sat his horse impassively, Rowel wondered maybe if people weren't partly right—maybe something had happened to the Captain's mind that day when Lije cut away from him. He seemed to spend more and more time up here on the knoll, looking down at the abandoned stage road that hadn't been used in years. That had been going on for almost ten years now, ever since the day word got back that Lee had surrendered at Appomattox.

At first, people didn't think anything about it. A lot of anxious families made daily pilgrimages down to the stage road, watching the bedraggled remnants of the Confederate Army march dumbly back to their poverty stricken homes. Watching for some familiar face, for some boy or man to answer to a familiar name. But that was a long time ago, and they had all gone back to their homes now. Only the Captain came back to this place every day, as if he still expected to see some familiar figure appear on the horizon where the old road threaded and lost itself in clumps of chaparral. But Lije never came back. And, because of his stubborn pride, the old man wouldn't have taken him in, anyway. He wouldn't even write the War Department—nor would he permit anybody else to do so—to see if Lije was dead. His son died, he said, the day he went off to fight with the bluebellies.

The old man turned slightly as Rowel pulled his horse alongside him. "Oh," he said vaguely, "it's you, Rowel."

"Yes, sir," Rowel said. "The business at the court house is all over. The jury decided I shot in self-defense."

The old man nodded, still vaguely. "That's good. You'd better get on down to the ranch house and tell your mother. She's been worrying about you."

"Bass and Duke have gone on down with the news," Rowel said. "There's something I want to ask you about. Clay Vought says our water claim on the White River won't hold up. I want to have a look at the papers on that, if you'll tell me where they are."

The old man shook his head slightly, as if to clear it. "Papers? If there are any papers I guess they'd be in Austin somewhere. You know I never took care of things like that while..."

His voice trailed off. He almost said, "While Lije was here." Lije always knew what to do, and he did it without asking a lot of fool questions. That, Rowel knew, was what the old man was thinking. He felt his face warm. He mumbled something, reining his horse around.

"Tell your mother I'll be down directly," the old man said.

IT WASN'T much of a homecoming, Rowel thought wryly. But, then it was about as he had expected. The family had never taken his trial seriously—it had been more of an inconvenience than anything else. Probably they would never guess how close he had come to actually stretching rope. Anything like that happening to a McCaffrey was too ridiculous to worry about.

He rode down the gentle slope, down to the corrals and outbuildings. Instinctively, when he saw Belle Jor-

dan, he reined his horse over toward the foreman's neat little log and rock house, but before he could complete the motion the same instinct made him swing back again. He smiled grimly. Running into Lije's ghost again.

But she called out from the front porch where she had been trimming a honeysuckle bush.

"Rowel! Rowel, wait a minute!"

She came running across the dirt yard with the effortless, weightless stride of a young doe. This older of Bass Jordan's two daughters was beautiful to look at—but look was all Rowel could do. She was Lije's. Just as everything else on the Box-M was still Lije's.

She was breathless as she reached the front gate. She called to him again, and there was nothing for Rowel to do but to ride over.

"I do believe you were going right on by without even saying hello!" she said.

Rowel felt his face warming again. How could he tell her that there was nothing he wanted more than to talk to her, to be with her? How could he say the things that he had wanted to say for years, to tell her how he really felt about her? There wasn't any way. Because she had been in love with Lije—still was. But he forced a smile.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I had things on my mind."

"Pa just came in with the good news," she went on seriously. "I'm so glad everything worked out all right. I was afraid....afraid the jury wouldn't believe you."

He wanted to ask her if it would have been so important to her if something had happened to him. But he only laughed shortly and said, "What could happen to a McCaffrey?"

Riding on to the barn, another shout stopped him for a moment. He looked around and saw Gay Jordan, the younger sister, brushing a big bay over in one of the holding corrals. Gay was seventeen, Rowel guessed, but she was one of those girls who never seemed to get over being a kid. She was still as wild as an Indian. There probably wasn't a horse on the Box-M that she hadn't ridden at one time or another. Rowel waved to her.

"Glad to see you back," she called. "But it cost me money. I bet the cook a nickel that they'd hang you."

Rowel laughed. "Maybe you can get your money back the next time."

The wrangler, an old Confederate soldier who had been with the Box-M almost as long as Bass Jordan, came out of the barn and took Rowel's horse.

"Glad to have you back, Mr. McCaffrey," he said respectfully. "Some of the boys got in a while back with the news."

"Thanks, Jed," Rowel said. "It's good to be back." The way they put it, it sounded as if he had merely been away on a little trip instead of fighting for his life.

His mother was the only one to show any emotion on his return. She was a round, solid little woman whose head barely reached the broadest part of her son's shoulders. She cried for a moment, and Rowel put his arms around her and held her until she got hold of herself. Then, womanlike, she wiped her eyes on her apron and said:

"Lands, you must be starved! I've just finished cooking fresh cornbread. And there's buttermilk in the cooler. You just sit here at the kitchen table while I get it."

Rowel sat at the table and dutifully ate the food set before him. He neglected to mention that cool buttermilk and fresh cornbread had always been Lije's favorite dish—but he had never cared for it himself.

THE EXCITEMENT of homecoming, what little there was of it, didn't last long. There was the business of running the ranch, and new things to worry about. The small ranchers were beginning to move in on the outer ranges that the Box-M

had always considered its own. And nesters were beginning to come down from Missouri and Kansas, building their brush fences and blocking old trails. Also, there was talk in White River, among small ranchers and the Clay Vought crowd, that maybe they would take the law into their own hands about the killing of Jess Neeley. But there was always talk. That was always cheap.

They were little things of course, annoying, but not real problems yet. But they'd be before long, Rowel knew, unless he got the water claim settled.

He did that by writing to Austin. If he could show proof that he had the legal water rights, the ranchers and nesters wouldn't be any problem. Let them settle on what they called Open Range. In a matter of months they would either move or starve. They couldn't live without water.

Almost two months went by before Austin sent a reply to his letter. Duke brought it in from town, a heavy white envelope with the State seal on the back.

"It sure as the devil looks like an important letter," Duke said dryly. "I cut off a date with a new saloon girl just to bring it out. What's in it, anyway?"

"Some information I asked for about the White River land..." But Rowel's voice trailed off as he began reading the first paragraph. He couldn't believe it. He read it again, and some of the shock must have shown on his face.

"Well?" Duke said.

"It's not good," Rowel said slowly. "The State land office has thrown all this country back to open range. It seems that our State grant doesn't stand up any more."

Duke's eyes slitted down in slow anger as he considered Rowel's words. "Clay Vought?"

Rowel held onto himself, because this was no time to fly off the handle and do something wrong. "Maybe," he said quietly. "Maybe not."

"And the water doesn't belong to us any more?"

"According to the letter, it belongs to anybody and everybody."

Duke straightened slowly. "I guess there's a way to settle that," he said tightly. "Vought's been begging for a showdown. It's just a matter of time before he gets the ranchers worked up enough to start a war against the Box-M and it won't be long. There's something else I found out while I was in town: Neeley's brother just rode in from the New Mexico country to take Jess' place with the Land Company. He's swearing to kill you on sight for shooting his brother."

Unconsciously, the kid's hand went down to his holster and hitched it around to a more comfortable position. He said, "If it's war they want, I guess we might as well give it to them."

CHAPTER IV

"THAT'S RUNNING!"

ROWEL SAID quietly, "We're in enough trouble with the law as it is, without starting more by opening a range war."

Duke stared at him, not quite believing what he had heard. "You're going to let Vought get away with it?" he asked coldly. "This was McCaffrey land before any other white man ever thought of settling here. To hell with what they have in the books at Austin. You've got to fight for what's yours."

You've got to handle it the way Lije would have handled it. Duke didn't say it, but that was what he meant. Rowel drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. For this one time he was going to handle it his own way. No matter what Duke thought. Or the old man. Or anybody else. He had seen enough of war, and he didn't mean to start one of his own if he could help it.

He said, "As long as I'm boss of

the Bar-M we're not going to start a range war. I want everybody to understand that. As far as the State is concerned we're going to do our fighting with lawyers, not guns."

Duke laughed abruptly, not bothering to conceal the scorn in his voice. "Sometimes I wonder just how you got enough guts to shoot a man like Neeley." He jerked around and started walking stiffly toward the corral. Suddenly, he stopped, and turned. "The Box-M would be better off if Lije was back," he said. "Maybe he's a yankee-lover, but guts was something he never was short on."

Rowel stood frozen. The break was clean now—he knew where Duke stood. And the others on the ranch were probably thinking the same thing. But he refused to back down. Something inside him told him that if he backed down now and did it Lije's way, then his own word would never amount to anything on the Box-M again. If he was ever to take Lije's ghostly hands off the reins that guided the ranch, it had to be now.

He said flatly, "We'll just pretend that you never said that, Duke. Now you better ride down to the east range and see about relieving the line riders."

For a moment Rowel thought the kid would declare his own private war, just between the two of them. But after a moment he wheeled abruptly, and marched off again in the direction of the corral.

Having Duke against him was bad enough. But that was only the beginning, Rowel knew, unless he could prove that his way was right, and war, Lije's way, was wrong.

That wouldn't be easy. Maybe it wouldn't even be possible. One thing was sure—if this land was open range now, it wouldn't stay that way long. Probably Clay Vought had already made a homestead claim on the water property.

That afternoon, to keep the family from seeing the worry on his face, Rowel rode west toward White River to try to think things out. White River actually wasn't what its name implied, but a large spring flowing out of white sandstone. The stream was only about four miles long, a silver thread crawling across the prairie, then disappearing again into the ground from which it came. Only near the center of the stream was there a hole large enough to water a big herd like the Box-M's, a bright place spread out like glass in the sun, and cool cottonwoods along the banks. That was where Rowel headed.

He had been to this place often—he and Lije and Belle Jordan used to ride down here before Duke was old enough to sit a horse. But, as they had grown older, it had been only Lije and Belle. Even as kids it had been that way. Lije and Belle. Rowel had caught on painfully early to that, and when they planned those rides down to the water hole he began to make excuses. Even then, Rowel supposed, he had been in love with Belle Jordan, but he was smart enough to see that Lije was the only man she wanted. So he had left them alone. He didn't try to butt in where he wasn't wanted.

That was a long time ago, Rowel thought, but things hadn't really changed. It was still Lije and Belle—even when there wasn't any Lije.

HE RODE down to the edge of the pool and unsaddled his horse beneath a dappled cottonwood. There was no sound except for the rattling of the leaves. The cattle down at the far end of the hole stood in the soft red mud and drank silently. *The quiet before the storm,* Rowel thought.

The storm would come. And Rowel didn't know what to do about it. He had already written another letter to Austin, filing homestead rights on the property, but he knew he was too late. Vought wouldn't have been so sure of himself, he wouldn't have shot his mouth off so

much, if he hadn't had the winning hole card.

Then Rowel remembered what Duke had said about the dead Jess Neeley's brother throwing in with the Vought Land Company. That could be the match to light the fuse and set off the explosion.

Slowly, in the back of his mind, Rowel became aware of the sound of hoofs. He turned, surprised to see Belle Jordan riding toward him from the direction of the ranch house. She rode sidesaddle, ladylike. Not astride, the way she used to, the way her sister still did.

"If I waited until I got an invitation," she said, "I'd be too old to join you anyway."

Rowel rose quickly from his place at the base of the cottonwood. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm a poor excuse for a gentleman, I guess. Anyway, I'm glad you came."

She smiled quickly at his puzzled face as he handed her down to the ground. "It's almost like old times, isn't it?" she asked. "Remember when cook used to pack lunches for us and we'd ride down here to eat? We had fun then, didn't we, before the war?"

Before Lije went away...

"Yes," Rowel said, "it was fun. Here, let me spread a saddle blanket for you under the cottonwood. I didn't have a lunch packed this time, though."

She laughed easily. "It doesn't matter. I like it here. It's the only cool place in Texas, I think, in the summer."

SHE SEATED herself on the blanket, crosslegged, with her skirts billowing around her. Her beauty was startling, in this country where anything beautiful came at such a premium. Rowel counted years in his mind. She was twenty-six, he guessed, or twenty-seven. And in this country a girl was considered an old maid if she reached her twenty-first birthday without a husband.

Not that Belle Jordan couldn't have had marriage if she had wanted it. She could still have her pick of all the men in White River, for that matter. But she didn't want them. Rowel remembered that she must have been only seventeen when Lije went away to fight for the Yankees.

Rowel sat beside her, studying the silvery surface of the pool. She went on talking, of "old times" as she called it, but never mentioning Lije.

Well, Rowel thought, there was one thing that he had learned. Not even Lije had been perfect. Lije should have made sure of those water holdings back when there wasn't anybody like Clay Vought to contest them. And he should have put some of the ranch's money into buying land, instead or trying to stock the whole of North Texas with Box-M cattle. But Lije had been like the Captain, believing the law was in the holster, that a man was entitled to anything he was big enough to grab.

That silvery pool, Rowel thought, would be a bloody pool if Vought brought his small ranchers in and decided to make a war out of it.

He had heard of range wars, down on the Brazos where most of the big cattle outfits were, but they had never had one up here. Rowel didn't like to think about it. It wasn't physical fear that bothered him—a few days in battles like Shiloh or Chancellorsville knocked all the fear out of a man, if they didn't kill him first. It was just that he had a good idea of how nasty war could be, for everybody connected with it. And it wasn't the carpetbag law that made him hesitate. He had no more respect for turncoats than any other Texan. But some day there would be real law in Texas, and would it be any different then? Would the McCaffreys still be fighting for something that wasn't legally theirs?

Bell Jordan said, "Rowel...?"

The word snapped his mind back to the present.

"Rowel, I don't believe you've

heard a word I've been saying. I think something's bothering you."

"It isn't anything," Rowel said quickly. But she knew he was lying. "Well," he said finally, "I guess you'd know pretty soon, anyway. It does look like there's going to be some trouble. How much, I don't know. Clay Vought has organized the small ranchers to take over the north range and the water hole."

She frowned. "They can't do that. It's McCaffrey property."

"That's the trouble. It isn't. Not legally."

She shook her head, not understanding. He tried to explain to her how the grant had been voided after the land had been left unsettled during the war.

SHE SAID, "Why don't you file a homestead claim, the way the nesters do?"

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that. I've got a hunch that Vought has some carpetbag friends in the State government, and they have already fixed it up for him to file." He stood up stiffly. "The truth is we've got about six thousand head of cattle and not an acre of land to graze them on, if you go by what the law says."

"But that can't be right," she protested. "Your father was the first white man to settle here. He made this country. They can't take it away from him like that."

"They can try," Rowel said tightly.

Her eyes widened and came to life with anger. The Box-M was a part of her, the same as it was with Rowel and the others. "Rowel..." she said finally. "What are you going to do?"

For a moment he said nothing. A germ of an idea had begun to grow in the back of his brain, but it was an idea so...so out of keeping with everything the McCaffrey name stood for that he didn't dare put it into words. Another thought kept nagging at him, an old habit of thought that said, *Think. What would Lije do? What would Lije say?*

But he put the thought out of his mind. This was his problem, not Lije's. Right or wrong, for once in his life he was going to settle it his own way.

He said, "I'm not sure, Belle, just what I'll do. I'm just sure of one thing, that I don't want any more killing if I can help it."

He couldn't be sure what she was thinking—and suddenly he felt that he had to know. And to find out, he had to take a chance and put part of his idea into words.

He said slowly, "I guess Texas isn't the only place in the world where a man could raise cattle. There's Indian Territory, or Dakota, or maybe New Mexico. They're wild places, I guess, but so was Texas when the Captain brought his first foundation herds in from Virginia..."

His voice trailed off as she looked away. He couldn't see her eyes, but he could almost hear her thinking: *That's running! A McCaffrey running, instead of fighting for what's rightly his!* And he knew there was no use trying to explain that a good general never fought a battle that he didn't have a chance of winning.

He said flatly, "The sun will be going down soon. We'd better be starting back for the ranch house."

THE OLD man was up on the knoll when Rowel and Belle Jordan rode back from the water hole. He watched them carefully, without seeming to. Captain McCaffrey was well aware of what the White River people thought of him—they said he was "teched." Maybe they were right, and maybe they weren't. But he didn't ride up to this place overlooking the stage road every day for the reason they thought. He didn't expect to see Lije come riding back one day, begging for his old place in the family. He neither expected it nor wished it. It was just that the knoll was a place of peace

and quiet, and there was nothing to disturb his thinking up here.

Oh, it hadn't been easy when his favorite son had turned his back on everything he had tried to teach him. It hadn't been easy for the Captain when, in anger, he had disowned Lije. But men had lived through worse things. And somehow—he didn't understand just how—he felt that his son was not dead, as the others believed. He was alive somewhere, and the Captain was not worried, because his second son could take care of himself.

It was the ones below who bothered him. Duke the wild one—Rowel the... The Captain didn't know just how to brand his oldest son, or if he could be branded. Although he was the oldest of the three boys, the Captain felt that he hadn't grown up yet. But he could understand that, because he understood the grip that Lije still had on the ranch and the people who lived on it. The old man smiled gently to himself. Time had spent the anger that he had at first hurled at his second son.

What do you think of it now, Lije? What about the nesters movin' in on the grazin' land we fought for? What about the upstart ranchers plannin' to take over our north range? Would you be running the ranch any different, Lije, if you was still the boss? He chuckled softly as the wind slicing over the knoll gave its answer. *You wouldn't like it, would you, Lije? It would be war from start to finish, if you was here, fightin' the whole blamed State of Texas if you had to. And maybe you'd be right....* He sighed a long, tired sigh. *And again, maybe you wouldn't....*

He often talked to Lije this way, up here on the knoll, with only memories and the sound of the wind for company. But mostly he just sat, and listened. And the things he heard would have surprised most people. For instance, he knew that the Box-M was in for trouble. Serious trouble. And he waited with a kind of quiet excitement to see what would happen. He could almost completely detach himself at times like this. He was the audience, and pretty soon the curtain would go up and the play would begin. He was too old for much sentiment about the ranch—most of that had gone the day Lije had cut away from him. But he could still enjoy a good performance.

He wondered how Rowel would act in the face of this coming trouble. He knew what he would do himself, if he were in Rowel's place, and he knew what Lije would have done. It was as clear as glass what Duke would do if Rowel didn't stop him. He would run off half cocked and shoot somebody and probably get himself lynched. But Rowel... The old man wasn't sure about Rowel. And there was nothing he could do now, except to sit, and watch, and let the boy work it out in his own way. If he could.

CHAPTER V

NINE POINTS OF THE LAW

ROWEL DID a lot of thinking that night, the kind a man does before a coming battle. His mind went back to Shiloh, where his regiment lay in the mud and darkness below Pittsburg Landing, waiting, and up ahead they knew that Yankee gunboats were pulling into position and pretty soon they would begin shelling their positions. They knew that before long the battle would start, but at that particular time there was a hushed, muffled silence. A time for thinking.

And that was the way it was now, with one exception. At Shiloh the battle had been inevitable. The lines were drawn and there was no way of stopping it, if he wanted to. If, in one minute, he wanted to throw away what the old man had fought for all his life. If he wanted to run—a thing a McCaffrey had never been known to do.

Knowing that made the situation

worse than Shiloh, in many ways. In the war it had been simple. You took orders, and fought, and lived or died, depending on how lucky you happened to be.

Rowel tossed uncomfortably. He wasn't complaining. He wasn't trying to shove the blame onto someone else —but why hadn't Lije seen to those water rights while he had been running the ranch? At least, why hadn't he taken Rowel into his confidence and told him about it?

The answer to that was simple. Lije and the old man had been cut from the same pattern. Possession was not merely nine points of the law, it *was* the law, as far as they were concerned. Before the war, land laws hadn't amounted to much. There was a lot of land and few men. But now, with the nesters, and small ranchers, and towns springing up at every creek fork, it wasn't as simple as that. Already nesters were settled in several places on Box-M grazing land. Lije wouldn't have permitted that, homestead law or no homestead law. Soon there would be more of them, homesteading legally, cutting quarter section slices out of the Box-M range. And now the ranchers.

The next morning Rowel felt that the Captain was watching him curiously, paying more attention to him than usual. He even came out to the shoeing corral where Rowel was getting a horse rigged to go into town.

"Good morning, Rowel." There was nothing wrong with the words, but in the formal way he said them.

"Good morning, Captain," Rowel said, cinching up first and then looking up. "Have you seen Duke around?"

The old man shook his head. "He rode over to the west line camp, I think. You going into town?"

Rowel nodded, glad that Duke wasn't around. He was planning to have an understanding with Clay Vought, and it wouldn't make things any easier having the hothead with him. Then, for no reason that he could think of, Rowel decided to ask the Captain's advice about the trouble. Rowel had almost gotten away from the habit of asking questions. The safest procedure, he found, was to do a thing the way Lije would have done it.

BUT THIS time Rowel was taking his own way.

"The State land office claims we haven't got a legal right to the water property," he said abruptly.

The old man seemed undisturbed. "It's been McCaffrey property for a great many years," he said.

"But it isn't now. Not legally, unless we can make a homestead claim. And I've got an idea that Clay Vought has already done that."

The old man studied the distance with pale, untroubled eyes. "How do you aim to handle it?"

Rowel swung up to the saddle. He sat a moment, studying the old man, before answering. "I'm going to Vought and see if it can't be settled without war. If that doesn't work, I've got an idea...an idea that you won't like. And probably nobody else will. But I'll tell you about it after I see Vought."

For a moment the old man's eyes seemed to cloud, as if shutters had pulled behind his eyes to shut his thoughts away from Rowel's curious gaze. At last he looked up again, placidly. "We've been here a long time," he said softly. "I got the place together myself—me and Bass Jordan. But I'm an old man now. I guess I loved the place more when I was young enough to fight for it. A thing's naturally better when you build it yourself and watch it grow, but most of the excitement is out of it now. It's your ranch, Rowel."

The old man nodded pleasantly and walked off toward the barn. Rowel thought, "A lot of help he is!" Not bitterly, or angrily, because he had become used to expecting those vague answers from the Captain. "It's your

ranch," he'd said. "You'll have to fight for it, the way I fought for it in the beginning," he might as well have added.

It was the McCaffreys against the State of Texas, plus Clay Vought and a dozen or so small ranchers. Texas was becoming cramped. The vast grass lands that had been so plentiful once were now over-grazed, except in a few spots, like the Box-M's holdings in the Panhandle. If they permitted Vought's ranchers to take over the north range, and even a part of the water, the McCaffreys might as well get out of Texas.

BLUE-COATED policemen watched with careful eyes as Rowel rode through the main street of White River. They were waiting for him to make a wrong move—any kind of move now would put him in jail again for breaking some carpetbag law. Hitching his horse at the rail in front of the White House, Rowel considered taking his pistol off and leaving it in the saddle bag. But he decided against it. The gun might invite trouble, but then, it might mean his life if Vought had already drawn his battle lines.

More careful eyes watched as he went up the plankwalk toward the White House. Strange eyes, a lot of them. Men lounging against the false-fronted buildings, seeming not to look at anything in particular. But Rowel noticed that their hands never strayed far away from their tied-down holsters.

The town smelled of hostility. Rowel wondered if these were hired gunmen—professional soldiers, of a kind, that Vought had brought in to strengthen the ranchers' forces. From the way they half turned and shifted positions to keep him in sight, he decided that they were.

Then, for the first time, it occurred to Rowel to wonder exactly why Vought was going to all this trouble. Vought was a gambler, not a cattleman. And Vought wasn't the conscientious type of man who would throw his weight on the side of the little ranchers simply because he thought they weren't getting a square deal. Well, whatever the answer was, it would come out soon enough.

He stepped through the batwings, into the White House bar, and almost ran head-on into Clay Vought. The gambler was walking fast, heading for the front door. But when he saw Rowel, he took time to pause and smile thinly.

"You're just the man I wanted to see," Vought said. "The fact is, I was just about to ride out to the Box-M."

"That's good," Rowel said evenly. "We can talk over here at a table."

The gambler went on smiling. "What I've got to say won't take long. I just wanted to tell you that you'd better start clearing your herds off the north range and away from the water hole. White River is on my property now. I just got word that my homestead claim has been made official."

Rowel stiffened.

"I'm taking my property over, McCaffrey," the gambler said pleasantly. "I've got orders from the Sheriff's office, and from the State Police office." He took a silver turnip from his vest pocket and glanced at it. "The fact is, my men are already moving onto your north range to take over the water hole."

Instinctively, Rowel wheeled and started for the door, but the gambler's cool, impassive voice stopped him. "If you're smart," he said, "you'll take my advice and not try to stop them. The law's on our side, McCaffrey."

ROWEL FELT an emptiness inside him. It was too late for talking. It was too late for anything. In the back of his mind he had had an idea that if he could only talk to Vought calmly, they could settle the thing without killing. But not now.

Rowel took a long time trying to get the words out, and finally he realized that he didn't have anything to say. He couldn't fight the whole State of Texas. There would be bloodshed

for nothing—maybe blood was already being spilled while he was standing here thinking about it. There was only one thing left for him to do—move out of Texas and make a new start in New Mexico maybe, or Arizona, some place where a man didn't have carpetbaggers and crooked laws to deal with.

That was the thought that had been in the back of Rowel's mind from the first, if it couldn't be worked out any other way. There was no disgrace in moving on to something new and better—that was what the old man had done when he had moved from Virginia.

Rowel heard the batwings clack behind him, then the sound of hurried boots coming into the saloon. A rider that Rowel had never seen before came down to the end of the bar and jerked his head at Vought.

"Be smart, Rowel," the gambler said, still smiling. "You're in for nothing but trouble if you try to stay in Texas."

He walked over to the rider. A quick whispered conversation wiped the gambler's smile away. A frown took its place. He jerked his head and three more riders came forward from the rear of the place. Without another look at Rowel, they all went out of the saloon.

The whole thing smelled of trouble. Probably the Box-M line riders had put up a fight when Vought's ranchers tried to move in. Rowel turned abruptly and walked quickly out of the bar.

The lounging men watched him from the corners of their eyes, and one by one began to saunter off to the other end of the block toward their horses. Probably, Rowel thought, they wouldn't try to start anything in town. But that was a chance he had to take. He hurried over to his horse and started unlooping the reins from the hitching rack. There was a small tapping sound from up above somewhere.

At first the sound only touched lightly in the back of his mind, he shrugged it off and put a boot in the stirrup to swing up. The tapping came again, this time a rapid tattoo of metal on glass. There was something about it, an urgency, that made Rowel turn and look up.

He didn't recognize her at first. She was just another saloon girl. A fancy girl with an unusually pretty face, tapping on a window. At another time maybe Duke would have been interested, but not Rowel. Anyway, there was no time to waste if he expected to get the ranch in time to do any good. Then the tattoo sounded again, like a flury of sleet on glass. He glanced up once more, quickly.

She was framed in one of the second story windows over the saloon, the hotel part of the White House. Then he placed her. She was the girl he had seen the day of the trial, the girl Duke had been with. And, Rowel remembered, the girl that Vought seemed to consider his own personal property.

The girl made a soundless word with her mouth, and her alarmed eyes added an exclamation point. "Please!" And she motioned quickly toward the stairsteps that went up to the second floor.

Rowel hesitated, thinking at the same time that it was crazy to hesitate at a time like this. But there was something about the girl. Something about the stark fear and alarm in her eyes. Why would Clay Vought's girl want to talk to him? He couldn't even guess. But her eyes said it was urgent, and he decided that one more fool's play on his part couldn't make things much worse.

He glanced around quickly to see if he was being watched. He couldn't see anyone. Quickly, he walked to the end of the block, circled around behind the buildings and came up to the rear of the White House. There were stairsteps there as there had been in front, and that was where he made for.

CHAPTER VI

NOBODY'S GIRL

AT THE head of the stairs there was a boxlike desk with a brass bell on it. That was the lobby to the White House Hotel. A door opened about half way down a gloomy hall and the girl motioned to him.

She was even prettier than Rowel remembered, pretty as only Mexican girls can be sometimes. She held the door open until Rowel was in the room, and then she closed it quickly and bolted it.

"You're Duke's brother?" she asked. "His older brother?"

She had only enough Mexican blood to warm her skin. It didn't enter into her speech. "That's right," Rowel nodded. "And I'm in a hurry, a big hurry. Whatever you have to say, please say it fast."

The tiny room could be covered in a glance. A bed, a cane-bottom chair, a wash stand and a box dresser. In the middle of the bed there was a straw bag partly filled with brightly colored women's things.

She saw Rowel's glance toward the bag. "I'm going away from White River," she said. "That's why I called to you."

She went to the window in a quick, nervous stride and glanced out. Rowel waited until she came back to the center of the room, and then he asked, "You're Vought's girl, aren't you?"

She laughed abruptly, without humor. "That's what he thinks. That's the reason I'm leaving White River. I'm nobody's girl. I work in saloons because I have to, because I have no family. But that doesn't have to mean what you think it does."

Rowel said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything."

She cooled off. She was a strange girl. Strange airs for a saloon girl to have. She made a nervous little motion of wiping her hand across her eyes. "I don't know where to start," she said. "If Vought knew I was talking to you he would kill me. He'll kill me anyway, I guess, if I don't leave here."

"Why?"

"Because of Duke."

HE MIGHT have known it. Probably he *had* known it, and that was the reason he was spending valuable time here when he should be at the ranch. The girl went back to the window, standing there, looking out.

She said suddenly, "Do you want some advice?"

"I can't promise that I'll take it, but I'll listen."

"Get out of Texas," she said. "If you don't, Duke will be killed. Vought actually wants a range war so he'll have a good excuse to kill your brother. He's crazy jealous, and Duke won't leave me alone."

Rowel said, "It's pretty hard to believe that Vought would start a range war just to better his chances of killing a man. It could be done easier."

"There's more to it than that," she said. "Vought wants that property of yours. He has friends in the government and they fixed it up for him to homestead on it. You can't beat him now. He has the law on his side. He'll get it in the long run, no matter what you do. Why don't you be smart and let him have it before somebody gets killed?"

"Somebody like Duke?" Rowel asked. "I thought you said you were nobody's girl."

"I don't belong to anybody," she said sharply. Then she turned away again, staring out the window. "All right, girls make mistakes. I made mine the first time that brother of yours came into the saloon. I had it good until then. Vought gave me everything I wanted. But then I had to go and fall for the wrong guy, a guy that could never do me any good. Just a kid."

Rowel didn't say anything. This was

the longest he had ever talked to a fancy girl. He'd had an idea that girls like that were made of steel and lined with brass and they could never be touched or hurt by anything. But he was beginning to see that he had been wrong.

She said listlessly, "So that's the way it is. But you don't have to be afraid that I'll try to bust in on your fine family. I know it would never work, even if Duke would have me like that. I just don't want him to be killed. That's all."

Rowel shifted uneasily, knowing that he ought to get out of there, and at the same time knowing that he still hadn't heard all of it.

He said, "What about Vought? Why has he gone to so much trouble and expense to get that water property of ours?"

For a moment he thought that she was going to laugh again. But she didn't. She said, "You don't think he's really concerned about the small ranchers getting a fair cut, do you? Sure, he's the small ranchers' friend now, but you'll notice that he's keeping the water property in his own name. He's just having them fight his war for him. As soon as the McCaffreys are forced out of Texas he'll put a price on it—a small one at first, to get them used to it, then raising it gradually until all their cattle money will be going into Vought's pocket."

Rowel stood stiffly, thinking of what she had said. It all figured. With a lot of hard work and an outlay of hard cash, a man could build one of the best ranches in Texas—if he had the water rights, the way Vought did. But Vought wasn't a man for hard work. He wanted quick returns for his trouble, and the easiest way to get it was to get the small ranchers indebted to him and then bleed them dry. Rowel felt his throat stiffen with anger. Giving up to the law was one thing, but giving up to a man like Vought was something else.

He said tightly, "Thanks. Thanks a lot." He turned for the door.

"What are you going to do?" the girl asked quickly.

Rowel paused for a moment. "I'm not sure yet..." Then he opened the door quickly and went out.

He circled behind the block of buildings again and came out on the plankwalk. His horse was still at the hitching rack. The men with curious eyes and conspicuous guns seemed to have disappeared. He swung up to the saddle, rode easily to the end of the street, and then put iron to his mount and fogged it north toward the Box-M.

THERE WAS no sign of Vought or his riders. Probably, they would be almost to the north range by now. Riding hard, Rowel tried not to think—but the girl's words kept coming back to him. *You don't think Vought's really concerned about the small ranchers getting a fair cut, do you?* He tried to tell himself to be sensible—now that he knew about Duke, it was more important than ever that they get out of Texas. But the thought was bitter and hard to swallow. Running from a man like Vought.

It was almost an hour before he finally raised the Box-M ranch house. There was something strange about the place, strange and empty and quiet. He rode around to one of the near corrals and the old wrangler came hobbling out of the barn. He was the only person in sight. Rowel dropped down to the ground and began stripping off his rig.

"Rustle up a fresh horse for me, Jed," he called quickly. "I want to get out to the north range, in a hurry."

The old man nodded nervously and hurried into the barn. He came out leading a lean little bay that he had just finished dressing down.

"Where is everybody?" Rowel grunted, throwing the saddle up.

"Up north," the wrangler said. "Trouble of some kind. Likely the penny-ante ranchers tryin' to move in on the water hole. Bass took all

the spare riders out about an hour ago."

"How about the womenfolks?"

"Your ma's in the house. Bass' girls are upon the north ridge, waitin'."

"Have you heard any shooting?" Rowel said, swinging back up to the saddle.

The old man shrugged. "I ain't heard nothin'. But that don't mean there ain't been a gun fired. My ears ain't been worth a hang since a Napoleon went off beside my head back at Chickamauga. . . ."

Rowel didn't wait to hear about the battle of Chickamauga. He jerked the little bay around and headed north. He purposely skirted the north ridge where Belle and Gay Jordan would be waiting for a report of the skirmish.

There was no sound of guns as he sighted the water hole, but he could see the Box-M horses picketed along the west bank, behind thickets of willow and salt cedar. He swung his own mount well around, keeping out of rifle range in case Vought's men were dug in upstream. As he came in from the east he saw Bass Jordan's big figure come out of a clump of brush and wait for him. In a moment, Captain McCaffrey himself joined the foreman. It must be important trouble, Rowel thought, to bring the Captain away from his day dreaming.

Rowel pulled the little bay in the picket line along with the other Box-M horses, and swung down. Bass Jordan's face was still in quiet anger as he came forward. The Captain's cool eyes showed nothing.

"This is it, Rowel," the foreman said stiffly. "Vought's got a whole goddamn army organized, it looks like. You can't see much from here, but they're all hid out in the brush upstream."

Rowel said, "Has there been any shooting?"

Bass Jordan shrugged. "Not yet. But it's just a matter of minutes. I figure Vought's got twenty, twenty-five men up there—cockleburr ranchers about half of them. The rest I figure must be hired gunnies."

ROWEL FELT sick inside. He searched the old man's eyes, but they told him nothing. Remained quiet, untroubled, waiting to see what Rowel was going to do. Then there was the crackle of brush behind him.

It was Duke, mouth tight, eyes grinning bright in excitement. "It looks like you got here just in time for the fun," he said to Rowel. Then to Bass: "Have you sent somebody out to bring in the line riders?"

Bass nodded. "They ought to be here before long. We'll be able to match them gun for gun, if we can hold them off a while longer."

Rowel half opened his mouth to stop it, but somehow the words wouldn't come. He remembered Pittsburg Landing and the deadly quiet before the battle and the helpless feeling of knowing that the battle was about to begin and there was no way of stopping it. That was the feeling he had now. There was no way of stopping it.

Bass said, "You want to look over our positions, Rowel? I guess you know about such things, being at Shiloh."

He knew about such things. He knew that one man bled as red as another. He knew that a handful of Box-M men didn't stand a chance against Vought's professional gunmen. He heard himself saying, "No."

Duke jerked around, looking at him with careful eyes. Bass Jordan said, "It was just an idea. I guess the men know what to do."

Rowel said flatly, "I mean there's not going to be any fighting. Call the men out, Bass, and tell them to go on about their jobs."

The foreman stood motionless. Rowel imagined that he saw a shadow of a smile across the Captain's eyes—but that must have been imagination. Duke wheeled on him angrily.

"What do you mean, 'call the men out?' This isn't a play party that you can stop any time you feel like it. That's Vought's gang up there, a quarter of a hundred gunmen. They're trying to take away our water. They're trying to move in on our land."

Rowel ignored the kid, looking at the old man. "It's not our water according to law. And not our land."

The old man's eyes shadowed, shutting out a sudden sadness. Duke flared again. "Do you know who's up there? Raff Neeley. The brother of the man you killed. He's the man that's got them worked up. Probably Vought doesn't even know about it."

"He does now," Rowel said. But he was thinking of something else. The kid had implied that if war came, it was Rowel's fault. And maybe he was right. Vought was a shrewd, cold thinker; he wouldn't start a range war himself unless he was absolutely certain that he would win. But a man bent on avenging his brother—that was something else.

A HOARSE, half-whispered shout snapped Rowel's mind back to the present. A Box-M rider raised up from behind a thicket, shouting to the men down the line.

"Here they come!"

Rowel stiffened. He called, "Hold your fire!" shook Duke's hands off his arm, raced up the grassy bank and dropped behind a salt cedar.

They were coming, all right. He could hear the crackle and pop of men working their way downstream. Rowel got to his feet, cupped his hands around his mouth and called:

"Raff Neeley, if you're up there come out in the open where I can talk to you!"

Bass Jordan's voice came from behind him. "Rowel, for God's sake, get down!"

But Rowel didn't move. Up ahead, he could hear angry voices in loud, profane argument. One of the voices belonged to Vought—the other Rowel guessed, belonged to Raff Neeley.

"Don't be a fool!" Vought's voice cracked. "Raff, get these men back where they belong. We'll start this war when I say so and not before."

Neeley answered with more profanity. There was an abrupt crackle of brush being parted. Rowel snapped around as a big, slab-faced man broke out into the open about fifty yards upstream.

"You want to talk, McCaffrey," the big man said flatly. "We'll talk my way!"

His gun was already in his hand. It blazed before Rowel could lift his hand. The best he could do was dive headlong into the short grass as he saw the pistol jump in Neeley's hand.

The bullet jerked at his left shoulder—a quick little tug that was all. Rowel clawed for his gun, but it was too late. Neeley had already jumped back into cover.

Instantly, the brush became alive with gunfire. In the background, Rowel could hear Bass Jordan's bellowing above the roar. He tried to lift himself off the ground, but his left arm gave away and he went down again. Suddenly a shade covered him. He looked up and Bass Jordan's big bearded face was looking into his.

"You crazy fool!" the foreman said angrily. "Here, catch hold of my hand and I'll drag you down the slope."

A dizzy red haze clouded Rowel's sight. From far away he heard Vought's voice shouting directions to his men. A good general, the gambler had accepted the sudden reversal and was getting set to make the most of it. Then Bass Jordan got hold of his gun hand and began tugging.

For an instant the haze cleared. For moment there was brief clarity in the confusion of the battle. Rowel glimpsed Vought step quickly into the open. He watched dumbly as Vought leveled his gun in their direction. He tried to jerk his gunhand away, but the foreman's iron grip was too much to break. He tried to shout, but by the time sound reached

his throat it was too late. Vought's gun crashed once, and Jordan's big big body sank slowly to the ground.

CHAPTER VII

GUN TALK

ROWEL CAME to briefly while they were lashing him onto a hastily made travois. His shoulder throbbed, and there was a new hurt in his head that he hadn't noticed before. He felt of his head carefully, feeling the warm stickiness of blood. Vaguely, he noted that guns were still firing.

When he cam to the second time he was in his familiar bed in the ranch house. It took a moment to get things straight—then he remembered the battle and the sounds of guns. He tried to sit up. The room spun quickly and he fell over on his side. When the room settled, he saw that Duke was standing in the doorway, looking at him.

"Well, by hell, I hope you're satisfied," Duke said. His face was streaked with dirt and sagging with weariness. Anger lay dully in his bloodshot eyes. He came into the room and stood stiffly beside the bed. "You started a pretty mess out there," he went on. "A pretty damned mess. Men shooting at each other like crazy people, killing each other. You and that damned fool stunt you pulled. What were you trying to prove? Were you trying to show somebody how brave you were? Now that you've started a war I hope you're satisfied. We're going to get our bellies full of war before it's over."

Rowel managed to sit up in bed. The kid was talking just to let off steam—he knew that—but just the same it made him mad to have the blame pushed off onto him when he was the one who had tried to stop it.

"It seems like I remember that you were ready for war not long ago," Rowel said.

Duke didn't even hear him. "That damned fool stunt you pulled," he said again. He turned on his heel and started for the door.

Something hit Rowel. "Bass," he said. "Was Bass Jordan hurt bad?"

The kid turned briefly and gave Rowel an unbelieving look. "Bass is dead," he said.

Rowel lay stunned, listening to the words echo in the empty room. Bass Jordan. Belle Jordan's pa. The man who was as much the Box-M as the Captain himself. Dead. He said the words over and over in his mind, trying to believe it. Trying not to believe it.

Slowly, the numbness went away, and an open hurt, deeper than a bullet wound, took its place. He closed his eyes and saw Clay Vought with his pistol leveled. What had his face looked like as he pulled the trigger? Had he been smiling? Yes, Rowel thought, he would have been smiling.

He felt of the crease along his forehead. *I'm sorry, Bass. Maybe it was a damned fool stunt at that. I only figured if I could settle my quarrel personally with Neeley that we could avoid a war. Or postpone it, anyway. But who would believe that? Besides you, maybe...*

A slow, deep anger began to join the hurt inside him. He knew what he had to do—and he couldn't do it lying in bed.

ROWEL AND the Captain and the preacher from White River were the only men on hand when they buried Bass Jordan the next day. The rest of the Box-M men were down at the water hole waiting for Vought's gunmen and ranchers to make their next move. The townpeople didn't come because they didn't want to take sides in the war until they were sure who the winner would be.

They buried the foreman in the family plot, on the slope of a hill to the north of the ranchhouse, beside his wife. As the preacher's voice

droned on, Rowel thought he could see the Captain's eyes growing older and older, and a great sadness bent his thin shoulders. Rowel was very careful not to look at Belle or her younger sister. He was afraid of what he would see in their eyes. He could feel, more than see, that somehow they were all blaming him for what happened.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. The Captain and the preacher began filling the grave.

After the funeral Rowel got Jed to saddle a horse for him. His shoulder throbbed dully, but his head was clear and he felt well enough to ride. And, somehow, he felt that he had to get away.

The Captain came around to the corral as Rowel was awkwardly fastening on his gun with his one good hand. Sadness was still on his face, but the vagueness had gone out of his eyes. "You ought to be in bed, Rowel," he said soberly. "You're not fit to ride yet"

"I'm all right," Rowel said. "It's just a flesh wound in the shoulder."

The old man didn't argue. Rowel climbed painfully up to the saddle, feeling that he ought to say something about Bass, but not knowing what to say.

At last he said, "How are things down at the water hole?"

"About the same," the old man said. "Vought's men are dug in upstream. We fought them off last night, but he keeps bringing in more hired gunmen like Raff Neeley...."

The Captain had already given up—it was only a matter of time before Vought would take over the whole range. And he didn't seem to care.

But Rowel was still remembering that smile of Vought's as he had cut down the Box-M foreman. He remembered Belle's dry-eyed grief and made a solemn promise to himself. They wouldn't lose the Box-M, not to Clay Vought. He didn't have time to convince the ranchers that Vought intended to bleed them white the minute he got control of the range. But he could take care of Vought himself.

Then, for the first time since the battle, he remembered the girl over the saloon in White River.

"How about Duke," he asked quickly. "Is he all right?"

The old man looked puzzled. "He's all right," he said.

"Where is he?"

"Down at the water hole, I guess." The Captain frowned.

Rowel pulled his horse around before the Captain could ask any more questions. When the girl had told him of Vought's plans, somehow he hadn't believed that the gambler would stoop to murder—but he knew better now. And Duke was next on his list.

IT WAS almost dark when Rowel rode into the armed Box-M camp. The chuck wagon had been pulled down near the water hole and the men were coming down one at a time to eat. The cook was ladling cold beans and side meat into Duke's plate as Rowel climbed down from the saddle.

The kid looked at him, then quickly looked away. He went around to the side of the wagon, sat against a wheel and began to eat. The night was tense and quiet, as if a hundred eyes were sighting down rifle barrels waiting for the signal to pull the triggers.

"I want to talk to you, Kid," Rowel said.

Duke stuffed beans into his mouth. "We haven't got anything to talk about," he said flatly. He noticed the tight sling on Rowel's left arm, and the band of cloth holding the arm close against his body, but he kept his silence.

"That girl back in White River," Rowel said. "Did you know she was Clay Vought's girl?"

The kid looked surprised. "Vought claims a lot of things that don't belong to him," he said.

"He's out to kill you," Rowel said. "Did you know that?"

Duke laughed harshly. "He's out to kill all of us! They're using real guns up there, and real bullets. What do you think they killed Bass Jordan with?"

"But you're different," Rowel said. "He's after you especially. He'll shoot you in the back, trick you, anything he has to do. I had a talk with the girl and she told me about it."

For a moment Duke didn't make a sound. Suddenly he laughed. "I'd like to have seen that! Rowel McCaffrey talking to a fancy girl, that would have been something to see!"

"You damned fool," Rowel said coldly, "can't you get it through your head that half the reason for this range war is just to give Vought an excuse to murder you?"

DELIBERATELY, Duke put his plate down and stood up. "Look," he said, "you can run the Box-M, that's your job. You can even run this range war if you want to, that's your job too. But there's one thing you'd better understand—you can't run my private life."

Unconsciously, Rowel began to think: *Do what Lije would do. Slap the kid down and teach him some respect.* But then they heard a horse coming across the flats from the direction of the ranch house. After a moment they could see that the rider was Belle Jordan.

Rowel and Duke came forward frowning. "Belle, you shouldn't be down here," Rowel said.

She answered him coldly. "There's a...woman up at the ranch house. She said she had to see you, and there was nobody to ride down here except me or Gay."

Rowel's frown deepened. He didn't know any woman who would be calling at the ranch house for him... unless— He saw that Duke was looking at him curiously. If the visitor was who Rowel thought it was, Duke would be better off to stay where he was. He said, "Thank you, Belle. I'll ride back with you."

He didn't give the kid a chance to ask questions. He mounted his horse again and swung in beside Belle Jordan. A woman, she had said. It was probably Vought's saloon girl, but he didn't try to figure out what she was doing here on the Box-M. He only knew that it must be important to make her take a chance like that.

It occurred to Rowel that he ought to offer some kind of explanation, but Belle Jordan didn't seem to care if fancy girls came calling at the ranch house. Her face was blank, as it had been at the funeral, her grief and bitterness showing only occasionally in her eyes and in her voice. Lije, Rowel thought, would have known how to comfort her.

But Rowel was no good with words. Everything stayed locked inside him—his love for Belle, his grief for Bass Jordan, his hatred for Clay Vought. This was one time that he couldn't force himself to act like Lije. When the time came he would take care of Vought, but he would do it his own way, without flash and flourish, and without heroics.

The girl was waiting in the parlor when Rowel got to the ranch house; and he saw immediately why Belle had referred to her as "a woman" and not "a lady", nor even "a girl." Her dress was gaudy and harsh-looking in the quiet lamplight of the parlor. There were touches of face paint on her cheeks, outlining her mouth. She looked like exactly what she was.

As Rowel came in he said, "You wanted to talk to me."

Her eyes widened slightly as she noticed his bandaged shoulder. She stood up, and then Rowel saw the ugly bruise along her left jaw and a blue puffiness under her left eye. She touched the bruise with a faint smile.

"Leaving White River wasn't as simple as I thought it would be," she said. "Vought's men stopped the

stage about five miles out of town and brought me back." She winced slightly, as if it hurt to talk.

Rowel didn't know what to say. He fumbled uncomfortably, motioning toward a couch. "Won't you sit down? What you have to say must be important, to take the chance you did of coming here."

"It's important," she said. "Vought plans to end the war tonight. And he plans to....kill your brother."

Rowel felt himself stiffen. "You'd better tell me about it."

SHE SANK back into the chair where she had been sitting. Her eyes were incredibly tired and dumb looking—and Rowel remembered that Belle Jordan's eyes looked much the same way the day before, at the funeral.

"Vought's hired gunmen aren't very eager to rush the water hole," she said finally. "They know that a lot of men would get killed in an open battle like that, and some of them wouldn't be Box-M men. Vought has decided to pull most of his gunmen off the north range and make an attack here on your main ranch house. It's to be tonight sometime. I heard them planning it."

Vought must have gone crazy, Rowel thought at first. But then he changed his mind. By hitting at the ranch buildings the gambler would be hitting at the very heart of the Box-M. He could burn the buildings, force the family out by leaving them no place to live. He could stampede and kill the stock but most important of all he could rob the Box-M of the solid, secure feeling that the ranch had always afforded McCaffrey riders and workmen....

"What time tonight do they plan the attack?" Rowel asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure."

There was no time to waste. Somehow he had to get back to the water hole and bring reinforcements—even at the risk of leaving the water hole unprotected. A thought occurred to him.... What if the girl was lying? What if it was just a scheme that Vought had dreamed up in order to take over the water hole without a fight?

But now was no time for doubts. He had to believe the girl. That bruised face, the anxiousness in her eyes, couldn't be faked. He went to the back of the house and called to Belle.

"That girl in there," he said, "she probably needs something to eat. And that face of hers needs attending to—would you mind looking after her?"

She stared at him speechless.

Rowel was suddenly impatient, and slightly angry. "She has risked her neck to come here and warn us that Vought has changed his fighting plans. The least we can do is be decent to her."

She shook her head, still not understanding. At last she said, "Of course, I'll see to her. I'm sorry, I didn't know...."

For a moment Rowel had the crazy idea that Belle disliked the girl because she had come here especially to see him. But it was just a crazy idea. He would do well to remember that and not try to make anything out of it.

"Thanks, Belle," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

CHAPTER VIII

BROTHERS

AN EARLY white moon was appearing in the east as Rowel got his horse and started the long ride back to the water hole. The night pressed down on him, the cool night wind in his face seemed to smell of death, and he forced his horse faster over the rutted, rock-strewn prairie.

As he neared the Box-M camp, he forced himself to slow the horse to

a quieter gait. At last, he dismounted and led the animal the last two or three hundred yards, hoping that Vought's men wouldn't hear him. Over to his right a bush rustled. A voice said:

"Just stop where you are, mister, till I see who you are."

"It's me, Rowel. I want to see the Captain and Duke."

The man stepped from behind the bush, cradling a rifle in his arm. "Sure, Mr. McCaffrey, I see you now. You want me to go find your pa and brother?"

"Do that. I'll be at the chuck wagon."

The man went off and Rowel went over to the chuck wagon where the cook was nursing a coffee fire that wasn't much larger than a match flame.

"Coffee, Mr. McCaffrey?"

Rowel took a steaming tin cup, his ears pricking up at every little night-sound. He could feel time running out. He could feel himself winding tighter and tighter, and he wondered how long it would take him to fly into a hundred different pieces.

"Quiet," the cook said. "Quiet as hell. You don't reckon Vought's men has up and vamoosed, do you?"

Rowel didn't bother to answer. He heard the sound of boots and two figures came out of the darkness, Duke and the old man.

Duke said, "Now, what's the matter?"

"Vought's changed his plans," Rowel said. "He's going to attack the house tonight and we've got to get the biggest part of the men up there before it happens."

Duke snorted. "Now that's a crazy damned idea! It's the water hole he wants, not the house!"

"He's going to attack it just the same," Rowel said evenly, keeping a heavy hand on his temper. "Go pass the word along to the men that they're to quit their positions, get their horses and walk them out of hearing distance, then ride for all they're worth toward home ground. Tell them to be careful not to be seen. If Vought catches on that we're pulling out, that will be the end of the war."

"It'll be the end of the war, anyway," Duke said angrily. "All he'll have to do is walk right in and take over the water hole. It'll be handing it to him on a silver platter!"

The old man didn't say anything. He stood quietly, staring at his two sons, then he went over to the cook and got a cup of coffee. It didn't seem to make any difference to him what they did.

ROWEL TOOK a step closer to his brother and lowered his voice until it was almost a whisper. "You said once that it was my job to run the Box-M," he said tightly, "and that it was my job to run this range war. That's what I intend to do. Now do like I say, and do it fast!"

The kid's head snapped up. He had never heard Rowel talk to anybody like that. He hesitated for a moment, thought about something, and then changed his mind.

"All right," he said angrily. "It's your ranch. If you want to hand it over to Vought, it's your business." He turned on his heel and went back into the darkness.

Before long he heard the men moving out, quietly, carefully, like soft-footed animals somewhere in the gray night. They got their horses and walked them away from the camp until the sight of them, and then the sound, was lost in the darkness.

Duke came back and said dryly, "Am I supposed to walk out too, along with everybody else?"

"You can suit yourself," Rowel shrugged.

He couldn't travel as fast going back as he had coming. His horse was too tired to jump gullies, to avoid rocks, to swerve around the scrub oaks that came upon them suddenly in the darkness. At intervals he cursed himself for leaving the ranch

house unprotected. He should have sent somebody else to the water hole. But who? Duke wouldn't have listened to anybody else... The thoughts shuttled impatiently in and out of his mind. At last he tried not to think of anything. Ride and hope, that was all he could do. Then—suddenly—the hope was knocked out of him.

He saw the red light leap up beyond a rise. The dancing glare spread along the dark horizon, seeping into the blackest corners of the night. Rowel felt his belly knot inside him, and he raked his spurs cruelly along his horse's ribs.

As he topped the rise he could see the big main barn with bright flames racing over it, leaping up from it. In the red light he could see horsemen racing in crazy confusion. Some of the Box-M men had already got into the fight, taking up their positions around the corral and ranch house and more were racing toward the battle, punishing their horses and yelling at the top of their lungs.

As Rowel looked, the ranch house began to burn, first a corner, then the roof, and suddenly the whole structure seemed to burst into a bright roaring flame. As soon as he reached the ranch yard, he swung down from the saddle and began running toward the burning house. He heard himself shouting crazily, calling his mother's name, and Belle's but the only answer from the house was a sound of twisting, tortured timbers as the building began to buckle. A bullet whined near his head as he ran. Another kicked up dirt at his feet. At last he heard her calling:

"Rowel! Rowel! Over here!"

It was Belle. He turned quickly and saw the Jordan girls and his mother and the saloon girl behind the tool shed, crouching behind a head-high pile of cut stove wood. Rowel wheeled and ran toward them.

Old Jed, the wrangler, was with them, banging away with a murderous looking old Cook infantry rifle. His face was flushed with excitement and he was grinning as though he was enjoying every minute of it.

"Ain't heard such a racket since the Battle of the Wilderness!" he shouted as Rowel skidded in beside him. "All hell's bustin' loose!"

ROWEL HELD his fire, trying to figure out where Vought's men were concentrated. After a while he noticed that his own men were being forced out of their positions around the corral, swinging around toward the tool shed and the other small outbuildings.

"Over there!" Jed shouted, pointing toward the shoeing barn and corral. "That's where most of 'em are. We shot hell out of them when they fired the house. I guess they figure it's safer to lay low and try to pick us off one at a time."

Rowel saw them then—or rather he saw the flash of muzzle blasts as they began to lay fire into the tool shed.

"You stay here and take care of the women," Rowel said to the wrangler. "Don't shoot unless you have to, you'll only draw fire and get somebody killed."

Reluctantly, the wrangler squatted down behind the pile of wood and began to reload. Rowel studied the women quickly to make sure that they were all right. His mother was fuming and muttering angrily at the sight of her destroyed home. The saloon girl watched with anxious eyes as each Box-M rider rode in to join the fight and Rowel knew that she was watching for Duke. Rowel could feel Belle studying him soberly, but he couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Rowel, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to try to get the fire away from this wood pile, that's the first thing. If we're lucky, maybe we can swing around behind them and shoot them out of their holes. If we're luckier still," he added tightly, "maybe Vought will be there with them."

He started edging around the side of the wood pile, getting ready to make his run toward the bunkhouse.

"Rowel..."

He paused for an instant, looking back at her.

"Rowel...be careful."

Be careful. His best friend had been killed, the ranch was burning, they were forcing him off the land that had belonged to McCaffreys for more than two decades, and she wanted him to be careful. But he was glad that she had said it. He was glad that she cared what happened to him.

"Don't worry," he said. Then he made a run for it, shooting as he ran over the red-cast ground toward the bunkhouse. He made it, hitting on his belly and sliding. He crawled inside where other Box-M men were crouching beside windows, methodically firing into the shoeing barn. At one of the near windows a man turned, glanced at him briefly. It was Duke.

"What are you doing here?" Rowel said.

"Is there any law against it?"

"No," Rowel said. "We need all the help we can get if we're to save any part of the ranch. They're bent on burning us out."

Duke turned back to the window. "Talking's not going to get rid of them."

ROWEL FELT his face burn, but he held his tongue because the kid was right. It would take more than talking. He fired once or twice into the barn, but he couldn't see anything, and the feeling of hopelessness got stronger inside him. He tried to guess at the number of Vought's men. Probably they outnumbered the Box-M hands almost two to one. If they did, it wouldn't be long before they started spreading out and come in from behind. Rowel started easing back toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Duke said, reloading his pistol.

"I've got to find Vought. They've got us outnumbered and we haven't got a chance unless we can get our hands on their boss."

Duke thought about it for a moment, then he put his pistol in his holster and said, "All right. Let's go."

Rowel grinned quickly. For once the kid was with him, he wasn't putting up an argument. For once he didn't say, "This isn't the way Lije would do it."

Outside the bunkhouse, they began to crawl away into the darkness. Let the men in the bunkhouse keep them interested. Vought had to be around somewhere—he wouldn't miss a show like this.

At last they got out of the ring of dancing light and began to swing in behind the shoeing barn. Suddenly, like the whip of a great knife through the air, a bullet slammed into the dirt beside them. Rowel looked around wildly, trying to see where the shooting was coming from. It wasn't coming from the barn. It wasn't coming from anywhere that he could see. In the back of his mind he heard a girl scream—then he saw the saloon girl running across the ranch yard, blindly, completely unaware of the bullets whining and snapping about her. Rowel heard a sickening *thunk* of a bullet slamming into flesh. He whirled to see Duke go down, holding his shoulder while bright blood began to ooze between his fingers.

"Get out of here!" the kid said hoarsely. "He's got a head on us! He'll shoot you to pieces if you stay here!"

Rowel grabbed the kid's arm and began to drag him. From the corner of his eye he saw the saloon girl, still running, and this time he saw that she was headed for the windmill derrick behind the ranch house. As she started to climb the wooden ladder to the tank, Rowel saw where the shooting was coming from. The windmill!

ROWEL CURSED—he might have known that Vought would pick a

place like that. The bright orange spurt of a rifle jabbed at the night, but this time the shot went wild. The girl was still going up the ladder—going after Vought, rifle and all.

Abruptly, Rowel turned loose of his brother and began to run. As he zig-zagged across the ranch yard, he saw Vought swing down with the stock of his rifle and knock the girl off the ladder. The gambler dropped to one knee on the wooden platform. As he began to sight along his rifle, Rowel fired. He fired again, stopping abruptly and aiming quickly.

For a moment he watched Vought. The gambler jerked up straight. He dropped his rifle. He took one or two foolish steps along the platform, lost his balance and began to grab. But there was nothing to hold to. He fell heavily, like a sack of grain. He hit the ground and lay still.

For an instant everything was quiet, as if everybody had been watching. Then Vought's men started shooting again; but somehow it was an empty sound, as if their hearts weren't in it. A yell went up from the bunkhouse and the Box-M men came pouring out in a wild, screaming charge that reminded Rowel of the fierce advances and bloody retreats in the almost forgotten battle of Shiloh.

Vought's men began to give ground, because there was nobody to lead them. Nobody to pay them. But as they retreated they fired everything they touched. All the outbuildings, the barns, the haystacks and corrals—they all seemed to leap abruptly in roaring flames.

And, somehow, Rowel didn't care. He was sick, and tired to the bone, and he didn't care if the ranch burned or not....

After it was over, he picked the girl up and turned her over to the women. He made sure that Duke wasn't hurt except for the clean rifle hole in his shoulder. They laid their own wounded, and the gambler's wounded, out on the ground and did what they could for them. There was nothing they could do for Vought. Except bury him.

A voice said: "Here's Raff Neeley, dead as a rock. Reckon he won't be hirin' out his guns to anybody else."

Rowel didn't look. He had seen enough.

CHAPTER IX

BUILDING AGAIN

AT LAST dawn came to the prairie—a swirling, smoky, charred burnt-smelling dawn. The ranch buildings that had stood so proud were now nothing but blackened skeletons. The heart of the Box-M was withered, and charred, and dead.

The Captain walked endlessly, dazed and shocked, from one burned-out building to another, saying nothing. The ranch hands who had made the Box-M their homes had the same dazed, helpless expressions. The women, Rowel thought, seemed to take it better than the men. Belle and her sister had salvaged a coffee pot and some pans and—God knew how—some coffee and bacon. Rowel's mother and the saloon girl were busily building a small camp fire to boil the coffee.

Rowel went over to where Duke was sitting. He rolled a cigarette and put it in his brother's mouth.

"How do you feel?"

The kid nodded, but his eyes held a stark look of grief and disbelief as he looked at the smoldering piles of ashes around him. Rowel wanted to say something about the saloon girl ...but what could he say? What good would it do?

The Captain came up and looked at them blankly. He looked vaguely around him and said, "Over twenty years of work went into this place... Twenty years..."

"We'll build it back!" Duke said

angrily. "Every damn stick and rock and nail will be put back just the way it was!"

But the old man shook his head, as if he hadn't even heard. He started to walk off again.

"Just a minute, Captain," Rowel said.

The old man turned, bewildered.

"I've got something to say that both of you have to hear," Rowel said. "Something I've been thinking about for a long time, but I haven't had the guts to put it into words—not until now. Maybe they did us a favor by burning this place down. Maybe that was what I needed to knock some sense into my head."

He took a long breath, trying to arrange the words in his mind as Duke and the old man gaped at him. "This is my ranch," he went on. "I can run it the way I want to, I can do with it what I like. Isn't that the proposition you made me the day Lije left the Box-M?"

The shock of hearing Lije's name did something to the old man. His lean frame stiffened. His eyes cleared.

At last he said, "That's right, Rowel."

Rowel nodded. "There's no use putting this off any longer. I told you once that I had a plan that you wouldn't like—and this is it. I'm not going to stay here and fight the whole state of Texas when we're legally in the wrong, the way Lije would. I'm through doing things the way Lije would do them. I'm going to do what I think for a change. To start with, we're not going to build this place back the way it was. We're not going to do a damned thing to it."

DUKE JERKED up angrily. He started to say something but Rowel stopped him with a look.

"Let me finish," he said sharply. "Like I said, we're in the wrong." He looked at the old man. "Because you and Lije didn't have sense enough to secure this land when you had the chance. We've got no legal right to be here, and we're not going to stay here—at least, I'm not. Texas isn't the only place in the world to raise cattle. There's Arizona—the San Pedro Valley is just begging for cattle to be on it, I hear."

"You're crazy!" Duke shouted. "Arizona's alive with Indians, everybody knows that!'

"So was this country," Rowel said, "when the Captain and Bass Jordan came here. But that didn't stop them, did it? It was legal law and carpetbag government. We'll know about that the next time."

"You're crazy!" Duke shouted again. "Do you want us to pack up and leave everything that we've worked for?"

"Who worked for?" Rowel asked. "Lije worked for it. And the Captain. But what did we ever do to make the Box-M a ranch?"

Duke said nothing because there was only one answer. Nothing.

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Rowel turned back to the old man. "That's my plan," he said. "If we try to stay here it will only bring on another range war. And they'll keep fighting us until they win because they've got the law on their side."

The old man stared. There was a strange look in his pale eyes, and way in the back of his mind he seemed to be thinking of something that pleased him. "Twenty years," he said. "That's a long time, and it's kind of hard to tear up roots and plant them again after that long a time." He looked at each of his two sons. "But, like you say, I guess this never was your ranch. It belonged to me. And Lije. The best thing about owning something is building it yourself. You and Duke have got a right to do that. I won't stop you."

He stared off for a long time. At last he smiled a small, wistful smile, and it occurred to Rowel that he had almost forgotten what a smile looked like on the Captain's face. "It might be good, at that," he said. "Building again, knowing that you've got a job to do." Then he nodded, as if agreeing with himself. "Of course," he said thoughtfully, "I wouldn't be much good at hard work, but I know about cattle. If you wouldn't mind taking an old man's advice, that is."

Rowel grinned. "I wouldn't mind. Neither would Duke."

The Captain walked off, nodding and smiling that small smile.

DUKE WAS still staring, as if he couldn't believe it. "Well, I'll be blamed," he said.

Rowel looked at him. "How about it, kid? The new ranch will be ours. Whatever kind of ranch it will be will depend on just us."

Duke bit his teeth together. "It's just that I don't like to run. Not from anybody!"

"Sometimes an army has to retreat," Rowel said, "to fight again."

He left the kid sitting there, and he wasn't worried about Duke now.

Rowel stopped suddenly. It seemed to him that Belle Jordan had suddenly materialized in front of him, but he realized that she must have been standing there all the time, listening to him. His face began to warm. He set himself to face her scorn, because he knew how she felt about leaving this ranch.

But, strangely, she didn't mention it right away. "Coffee is ready," she said. "There'll be some bacon after a while."

"...Thanks."

Then he noticed that the saloon girl was missing.

"She had one of the riders take her into town," Belle said. "She said that she wanted to take the morning stage for El Paso."

That was the only way it could have ended, Rowel thought. She hadn't meant anything to Duke.

"It was Duke she was in love with," Belle said.

"Yes, I know." Rowel turned his head. "Who did you think it was?"

She smiled suddenly. "I was afraid it was you."

He didn't know what to say. He wondered if he was hearing right. At last: "Did you hear what I said about leaving the Box-M and going to Arizona?"

She walked a while without speaking. Then, when she did speak, her voice was very soft, as if she were talking to herself. "Sometimes I used to wonder if you would ever be yourself and stop trying to be Lije. This morning I found out."

He didn't have to ask any more questions. All the answers he wanted were in her eyes. As she poured his coffee he said, "Arizona is a wild place. There'll be Indians, and fighting, and hard work.... I guess it isn't the kind of country that women would like."

"Don't you think that depends on the woman?" she asked. "And the man she's with?"

● END

THE DESPERADOS

The Sante Fe bandits were still on the loose!

by JOHN PRESCOTT

The kid had heard about men like this — he didn't figure he'd ever cross the trail of any of them though . . .

WHEN THE Cartwheel operator had told him for the second time that day that the Santa Fe bandits were still at large Jimmy Callahan snapped the phone onto the hook and swore. It had nothing to do with the fact of the bandits, whatsoever—they had been on the loose for more than a week; it was simply that the interruption of the chatty operator had distracted him, a fact which added to his already overburdened feeling of distress.

There were a great many things which combined to make life miserable for Jimmy on that hot afternoon in the cow-camp shipping point at Echo Wells. As he sat at the rough, box desk with his sweating fingers turning the limp sheets of the tally list, he was acutely aware of the particular irritation of each of these;

(please turn to page 55)

WILD RANGE

Then Chok's tusks went into terrible action!

by
HAROLD F.
CRUICKSHANK

When the man creature invaded the rugged hunting grounds of the wild ones, he had to expect a savage showdown!

CHOK SLAVERED at the jaws, rearing to his full majestic height. The big silvertip chieftain moaned, whimpered like a lesser creature. But this belied the fighting heart of the great grizzly bear, and the vast anger that began to surge in him as his keen nose brought him a danger tang.

Chok came down to all fours and weaved his ponderous nine hundred pound body from side to side. His short ears pricked forward to catch those strange sounds. They were not like anything he had ever heard before.

For the rattle of wagon wheels had never before marred the quiet of Chok's wild range. He had tanged the scent of man creatures—of horse hunters, Indian and white alike, but not for some time had man trod this Medicine Bow zone where Chok had reigned king over all for nearly twelve years.

Now came man-made voice sounds, and the heavy froth dropped from Chok's jaws in foamy chunks.

He blinked his little eyes at the lush valley below and caught a blur of movement, and then his big nose wrinkled as delectable tangs came, of horse stock and cattle, overpowering the dread scent of man.

Chok champed his foamy jaws, and moved on down an old slide from the plateau on which he had been sunning himself, high up, away from pestiferous flies.

He ambled into a draw bottom and small life scuttled from his path.... whistling marmots and other rodents. A red squirrel scampered, chirring up the bowl of a Douglas spruce, there to scold from an overhanging limb.

Chok coughed deep in his cavernous throat and clacked his great tusks.

It was cool here in the big draw's deeps—an excellent place for the hunting of rodent life which formed a fair part of his diet in the summer.

The autumn sun was high, and hot, and before very long, Chok would start hunting more vigorously, for bigger game, so that when the heavy snows and biting winds came, he would have a thick layer of back tallow under his heavy, silvered coat, tallow which would sustain him throughout the period of his hibernation.

Now he turned up a slash in the draw and mounted its easterly bank. Chok was a creature of diurnal habit.

He was also a creature of great wisdom and cunning, hence his movement now, on down to scout at closer range these newcomers to his wild domain.

Chok tested wind and moved slowly through the brush to within a hundred yards of a wagon outfit, whose steamy horses were being unhitched, and unharnessed.

He watched the horse creatures roll in a flat of sand, heard them groan in their contentment, and his belly rumbled with desire as their inviting, sweat-tainted scents reached him.

There were two horned creatures, the one heavy of neck and body. He watched this one toss its head, curl its upper lip then give out a shrilly bugled cry, high-pitched and penetrating, and Chok's silver-tipped hairs rose, and his eyes flamed, for there was challenge in the bugling of this bull, challenge such as came from the throats of Manya the king bull elk and his kind, later in the autumn.

The other horned one was more docile, albeit her eyes were wide, staring. Her belly was fat, and now Chok watched the smaller of the two man creatures lead this one off to a patch of lush grass.

Thus there came to the valley below the wild Medicine Bow range of Chok, the first frontier pioneers, a young man and his wife, and Chok closed his jaws and cocked his head as he listened to their voice sounds....

CAL MASON led his horses to a meadow which bordered the narrow, winding creek. Between two grass-grown old beaver dams, he tethered out his team, then walked over to slip an arm about his young wife's shoulders.

"Well, hon, here it is! Like I told you all along. Perfect, huh?" Cal hugged her tightly.

Jane Mason's mouth grew slack, as her eyes widened. She was staring off to westward, to the brush and tree-studded hills, and beyond, to the rugged mountain faces which the sun splashed.

"I—yes, Cal dear, it is—it's wonderful, but I'm a bit afraid. We seem so alone, and this—all this—" she flung out an arm "—seems so *powerful.*"

From nearby, a brown thrasher gave out his mellifluous song, and down the creek a green-winged teal piped. Cal spun, a grin on his lips. There was everything here that he had dreamed of—grass, water, wildlife; fish in the creek, and ducks, and plenty of spruce for the building of his and Jane's home and the stables he would need.

He heaved his broad chest and sucked in the wild fragrance of mint-

flavored grass, flowers, all blended with the winy tang of wild fruit.

Then suddenly a fickle wind fanned his other cheek and he spun as one of his horses half reared, whirled, and lunged on its tether rope, almost drawing the picket pin.

Cal spun, too, and stared off into the wild buckbrush and aspen belt to the west. Jane moved timorously toward him and clutched at his arm.

"What do you think—it could—be, Cal?" she asked huskily.

His set face relaxed. He was used to the wilds, but in another district, far to the north. He could read sign: some wild creature had spooked his stock.

"Could be bear smell, or coyote, or even big cat, hon. Shift of wind brought some such scent down, but don't be frightened. Those wild critters are the frightened ones. After we've eaten a bite, I'll take the Sharps and go take a look-see a ways. Now—a fire..."

Cal caught a mess of speckled trout which Jane fried, and they sat down to enjoy their meal as the sun arced toward the gaping maw of a pass between two towering peaks.

Shortly, Cal examined his Sharps, slung it into the crook of an arm, and moved off. He walked lightly through the brush, for he was accustomed to the woods from his boyhood days.

Suddenly he checked to a sharp halt, and cocked his head. Brush had crackled not far off, ahead. Then all was still save for the hum of insect life... Call lowered his glance, then started sharply. He dropped to a knee, his lower jaw slack as he saw the full, clear imprint of huge grizzly tracks!

"Must weigh half a ton!" he told himself. "And was in close. Heard us coming and came to scout..."

Cal quivered as he got to his feet. He felt the urge to move on in the big one's trail, but suddenly changed his mind, albeit in his mind there was a powerful urge to spend some time, unknown to Jane, hunting down the big silvertip. For Cal knew that at this season of the year his stock, which were to become the nucleus of his future spread, could all be destroyed in one raid by the grizzly.

He was staring off toward a hogback ridge when he saw the huge form of the silvertip. He flung up his rifle—but the creature as quickly vanished....

CHOK MOVED on back to his night bedground, harboring the sounds he would have liked to have voiced.

He had seen, had heard, and had smelled the new, strange creatures. The tang of the stock had been tantalizing, but overpowering, there was that dread scent of man, and down through the ages Chok, among other species of wildlife, had sharply developed instincts and inhibitions about man and his power.

Yet suddenly the big silvertip, reaching a patch of scrub brush, alder and willow, rose to his full height and choffed his powerful jaws as he flailed the air with his massive forepaws.

He was Chok, the chieftain of all this wild Medicine Bows rangeland and its lower valley country....and again the heavy foam began to drop as his anger and his hatred mounted. He dropped to all fours, half rose and leaning over on his left side, smashed at a willow clump which then he attacked with his powerful tusks and for several minutes proceeded to thresh and tear and destroy the growing scrub.

Then whimpering softly, he ambled on, back to his favorite hunting draw where, before the ashes of dusk were sifted down, he dug vigorously and snatched up the rodent tidbits until his appetite was appeased. He moved on along to a trickling spring, where he drank, and then slowly climbing, he reached a point of vantage where on a plateau, he would bed down, his nose into wind, while the great, powerful wild night settled its dark mantle over all his kingdom.

When the pale dawn began to stencil the eastern horizon with its pastel

pinks, Chok sat up on his big stern and blinked. His sight was his weakest sense and from time to time he stared nervously as shadows flitted in the still dusky brush-studded places. He suspected every movement as the movement of a potential enemy. Fearless as he was, there was no more nervous creature in all the hinterland.

His poor vision, or comparatively poor vision, accounted for the many times he rose to his full, majestic height, to weave his head from side to side when some movement blurred, and the wind was against his keen nose catching the scent.

Day after day, as he hunted the big draw, Chok started at every unusual sound. This morning he was exceptionally nervous, for there was a dearth of food along his hunting trails.

Suddenly, heaving his big body over a natural blockade along the draw, an old slide, he rocked back on his haunches.

From directly ahead came the fetid scent of a swiftly moving yearling buck.

Chok crouched back, and clamped his great jaws shut. His nose quivered. He was testing for sign of danger, possibly a lion in pursuit of the deer, but he detected no such alarming scent.

Well crouched, his every nerve fibre tingled as the drumming of those hoofs became clearer, and then, the fear-sweated deer leaped high, stumbled, at the near side of the blockade, and Chok galvanized to action. With a speed that completely belied his great bulk, he sprang. As the young, frightened buck half rose to a recovery, the massive right forearm of Chok drove in a short arc. There was a soggy crack, and shortly the powerful tusks of Chok were sinking, and tearing....

He backed off now, blood crimsoning the falling froth from his champing jaws. He gave out those soft, almost ludicrous voice sounds as he swayed from side to side.

Not for some time had he seen deer sign on his immediate home range at this time of the year. The black-devils were usually in the higher country, to escape the flies. Later, during the period of the rut, they came down to the country.

Chok was a careful feeder, a sort of gourmet of the wilds. He preferred to eat sparingly of a fresh kill, but to mound it over with rubble and leaves for a day and night or so.

But he was hungry this morning, and now moved in to effect some skillful surgery and butchery. He was down, belly down, choffing succulent fresh meat when suddenly he heard windfall twigs crack beyond the barricade. He whirled, then rose to his full height.

Because of the barricade there was no opportunity to rush the man creature, so close in Chok's eyes saw him clearly.

For a brief moment or so the big grizzly chieftain seemed frozen in his towering poise. He was wheeling on his stern, to drop, when something struck him viciously in his near shoulder. With a coughing roar, a roar that was almost drowned by strange and frightening thunder, he whirled. His nigh side forelimb buckled under him as he lunged to a thicket.

Again he heard that thunder, after the brush about him was slashed.

Chok smothered an urge to roar with pain as he pushed on through the thicket, into the deeps which screened him.

He was a master of cunning, and now exercised his every talent and sense, as he weaved on, scarcely cracking a twig underfoot. Then at a point where dense second-growth aspen and huckleberry underbrush flanked the path of an old slide, he painfully dragged his huge bulk up, to become lost in the heavier deciduous growth above.

Stopping only once to bite at his painful wound and flick his sodden coat with his tongue, he wheeled and moved north, paralleling the direction from which his attacker had come along the draw bottom....

AN HOUR or so later, the chieftain silvertip struck a fast-water mountain creek. He groaned with ecstacy as his great pads sank in the sand and small gravel, but he pushed on upstream for some considerable distance before at last, on a white-water riffles, he sank onto his wounded side, and grunted contentedly as the cold water laved his gaping wound and brought surcease from the throbbing pain.

In time, he moved out to a flat slab of rock on the right bank, turning, to rear and sniff into wind, but only faintly came the dread tang of the man creature.

However faintly the scent, it surcharged Chok's brain with mounting anger and hatred. Man had come to his domain, man and his great power to hurt and to kill, and steadily Chok's sense of dread was replaced by a growing sense of bitter hatred.

He returned to midstream and lay on his side, chortling softly. When a kingfisher struck down at a small minnow in the nearby waters, Chok merely grunted. He clacked his great tusks when a sharp-eyed mink raised its head and glared at him with fierce eyes. The dark-toned killer wheeled and scampered off.

A school of rainbow trout flashed by, but Chok made no effort to snap at one. He groaned and whimpered in contentment, as the cold water administered its first aid to his wound.

In mid-afternoon, when the sun poured down its full fire on the wilderness, Chok sought out the cool timbered zones. He had lost much blood and shortly was bedded down, his great nose into wind.

Flies began to harass him, and he snapped savagely at them from time to time as his small eyes became inflamed with anger. Flies would become a great menace, and might force him into a stiff climb....up into the rugged toplands, near the tip of the timber line, but there the food was scarce.

For an hour or two Chok gave himself up to the soothing sleep which drugged him, but he awakened with a start, and his nose wrinkled as he caught the tang of lion.

He rose to his stern and wheeled to glimpse on an overhang of rock above a long tawny lioness and two almost fully-grown younglings. Three sets of baleful eyes glared down at him. Chok watched the back muscles of the big lioness ripple. They were bitter enemies, and Chok instinctively sensed that Acheeta, the lioness, was on his trail.

Without the help of his great nigh side forepaw, he was in no condition to join battle.

Chok, however, had other powers. His great roaring voice, and bluff, and he put them into action now as he gaped his jaws and exposed his huge tusks. Deep throaty growls poured in savage gutturals from his throat, sending the young lions bounding off to the cover of scrub thicket growth.

Acheeta, wise to the ways of this big enemy, stood her ground, her long tail switching from side to side as she, in turn, peeled her lips back to expose her own killer fangs.

But in time, she flicked the foam from her jaws with her tongue, and snarling, wheeled to rejoin her younglings.... And Chok settled back to grunt and sway.

The emptiness of his belly at last forced him down from the highlands, but when he sought out the old deer trails, he found all tracks stale. The coming of the man creature had pushed the wild denizen deeper into the timber country.

With his one sound forepaw, Chok dug furiously for rodent life, but seldom found sufficient marmots, or gophers, or mice, to appease his great appetite.

He was forced down to the lower country, the danger zone, where the tang of his new enemy, man, was fresh. Every now and then he rose to his full height in the cover of a willow clump, to test wind, and each time he chortled

softly and began to drool, for the tang of the man's creatures was powerfully tantalizing. His great empty belly growled in its protests.

Chok became more and more alert, for his wounded shoulder muscle, still harassed by flies, was slow to heal. For more than a week, he ranged in a wide circle about the habitat of the pioneer folk, visiting the riffles of the creek often to lave his bealing wound, and snarl as he missed a flashing trout which escaped him.

THE BIG silvertip chieftain welcomed the coming of the first sharp frosts. One of his greatest worries was the fly menace. With the coming of cold nights, the fly hordes diminished and Chok was able to wallow in the muck of a nearby marshy lake, or in the fast white water of a mountain stream and sense at last that his shoulder wound was healing.

Daily he put more of his weight forward on the wounded limb, and this morning, choffing sharply, clacking his great tusks, he smashed a terrific blow at a clump of wolf willows to test the power of the healed muscle.

At first he made almost ludicrous voice sounds as pain assailed him, but he struck again and again and although he started some light bleeding, his shoulder stood the test well.

By the end of the week, his belly was gaunt. He had traveled far in search of an unwary fawn, or yearling buck, but wherever he went, the dread tang of the man creature told him that the wild ones had already been pushed back deeper into more rugged country.

Today, while a heavy fog coiled about the lowlands, Chok ambled on toward the undulating valley. It had scarcely broken day, and from time to time he braked to a sharp halt, as a puff of breeze parted the mists to expose some dark shape. He blinked at the object, and put his keen nose to work, when his poor vision failed him. Each object took the form of a fire-killed tree trunk, and he choffed his great jaws, slavering in mounting anger.

Now he was in the clear, his back against a fringe of scrub growth, willow and alder, when he caught the tang of smoke.

Then above the dread smoke tang there came other scents, scents which disturbed him and tantalized him. There was the tang of a new born calf, but over-lying this was the sharp scent of Acheeta, the big queen cat.

More than once in recent years the hunting trails of Chok and Acheeta had crossed. There had been sharp clashes, and Chok's heavy coat still showed the mark of those rowelling talons. Silvery streaks along his flanks were the brand of Acheeta. Never had he had the speed with which to pin her or her kind down, set them up for one single blow from a forepaw, or a bite from his all-powerful jaws.

This morning, Chok had found a source of food and not in some time had he needed big food more.

His great body began to weave, and then he rose to his full height as the quiet of the wilderness morning was blasted by the bellowings of two creatures—the cow and the bull; the one deep in tone, the other shrill, bugling.

Chok felt the urge to thunder back a roar of counter-challange but his better judgment prevailed. He sniffed and caught again the man sign, the acrid tang of burning wood. It sobered him and he moved forward with great caution as the dawn breeze sharpened and the mists parted to expose a small lush meadow.

Then the foam mounted at Chok's champing jaws as he saw the long, tawny form of Acheeta. The big cat was crouched, a forepaw on the inert form of a small white-faced creature.

CHOK MOVED down in the bottom of an old beaver channel, a grass-grown draw, as he circled the site. In great agitation, the cow and the young bull poured out their wild calls.

When he reached a cul de sac, at an aged beaver dam, Chok was forced

to expose himself, but quickly slid into the cover of a willow fringe, from which he swung on his stern to blink his eyes.

He saw the white-faced bull creature paw up divots of turf, flinging them high over his back as he challenged the crouched form of the big cat.

Now and then the mother of the calf lowered her head and started to rush, but Acheeta whipped her lithe form into a position of ready defense or attack.

Acheeta's back was now to him. He began to weave forward, crouched as low as he could in the tall bluejoint grass. He had the wind in his favor and eased over to bring a low ridge between him and the creatures at the site of the kill.

Now Chok wanted to sneeze the hated scent of the lioness from his nostrils. His small, though powerful brain flashed its strong messages to his impulses, but he remained crouched until suddenly he heard the white-faced bugler rush.

Simultaneously Chok sprang and rushed.

The cow blatted, whirled, and with tail high broke for the neck of the meadow.

The bull was down but he rolled, and Acheeta bounded to her feet. She had come within a hair of delivering a fatal attack. Now the bugler whirled away. He was streaming blood from the nostrils. Acheeta in her anger, loped after him, but instinctively he wheeled to face her.

It was then old Chok rushed in and snapped his powerful jaws on the limp calf shape. He whirled and broke for the north west, heading for the willows before Acheeta was aware of the loss of her kill.

Chok had scarcely reached cover when the wilderness morning was shattered by that dread man-made thunder.

He felt the skin on his heavy dome twitch. Grunting, he lunged deeper into the underbrush thicket and then again he heard the crashing thunder. He heard, too, a wild screech from Acheeta....

Shortly, he heard brush crack. He half turned and above the strong tang of the dead creature in his jaws, he picked up a whiff of cat scent.

The big lioness sped by, but she had not gone far when she buckled, forward, and snarling, coiled to snap at a wound in her afterparts....

Old Chok grunted and spun away. He ambled on through a draw, following it for a quarter mile before he laid down his pilfered kill, to wheel and test for danger sign.

The breeze was now fickle, and from time to time the silvertip chieftain picked up a whiff of man scent, but it was not strong enough to fill him with any great degree of alarm.

However, he practiced his well-developed cunning, and back-tracked, crossing again the tang of Acheeta, before at last he climbed.

When finally he reached a favorite rimrock haunt, he thrust the calf into a recess in the sheer wall of a cliff and swung about, to rear to his full height. He was well covered by scrub mountain wild fruit scrub and for long moments stood, allowing the breeze to bring him the blended scents of the strange creatures and Acheeta.

Chok was never one to immediately gorge on a fresh kill. Hungry as he was, he dragged the carcass out to the open plateau shelf, sniffed it, weaved about it, whimpering, chortling in great contentment. Then at last he crouched, belly down and his great incisors began their delicate butchery, wildlife surgery, and Chok feasted lightly but well on his first big food in some time....

It was a sudden puff of man scent impregnated wind that brought him whirling about, his jaws slavering the succulence of the tender calf creature. Then the canyon below boomed to the crash of that strange thunder.

Man was in close, and Chok seized the mutilated calf carcass and pushed

on up through a cleft in the rocky walls, while below in the canyon bottom, Cal Mason, the pioneer, swore bitterly as the long, tawny form of Acheeta again escaped....

WEARY, dispirited, Mason started his downward trek shortly after noon. He had been warned by ranchers to the east that he could expect trouble from grizzlies and big cats. Such trouble had manifested itself already, at the loss of the first calf.

He glanced down at the old Sharps in the crook of his right arm. Certainly he must buy a more modern rifle, perhaps a .45-70. He would need a rifle with faster repeater action and killing power.

Now he thought of his young wife, Jane. It was Jane who had heard the bellowings of the cow and the bugling of the young bull at the meadow.... Together, she and Cal had looked forward eagerly to the coming of their first new head of stock.

The cow and young bull had been wedding gifts from Jane's folk, who had cautioned about the hazards of pioneer life.

Now Cal shrugged. He lifted his gaze and his eyes widened. The sun was at its autumn zenith and the entire valleyland below flowed in great beauty. He expanded his chest with deep inhalations of a wild fragrance —blended scents which tickled his nostrils. He was still staring wide-eyed at the valley, when a dark object moved past a fringe of brush beside a small boxed-in meadow.

Cal quivered with excitement. When again he saw the movement, he licked suddenly parched lips.

"Elk!" he gasped.

He eased over right and carefully planted his rifle's long barrel in the fork of an aspen.

Other forms moved from the cover of brush. Cal counted them, four cows, fat cow elk, which trailed the swaggering young bull.

Cal gave all his attention to the bull, whose antlers were magnificent. He lined his sights on the bull's near shoulder, but all at once he straightened.

This was no time for trophy hunting. A fat young cow would be of more importance—excellent, the most excellent, camp meat.

He let two of the cows mince on by, and then lined his sights. He squeezed his trigger and the third cow pitched forward, half reared, and dropped....

Mason's hand trembled as he set about immediate part dressing. His excitement was great. He chuckled throatily as he gutted the kill.

Now getting to his feet, he half turned and in a flash glimpsed the remaining small band of elk trotting across a hogback ridge, the bull in the lead, and a strange pang of remorse struck him.

He had cursed Acheeta and Chok. But here he was as "guilty" as they had been. He had invaded the range of the wild ones, and they too had in their own way attacked—to kill for food.

Shrugging, he cut out the elk liver, stretched a jumper buckskin jacket across the carcass, then with his Sharps in the crook of his arm, moved on to camp....

He raised the liver high as Jane came to meet him.

"Elk, Jane! Fat young cow—enough meat to do us a long spell!"

Jane was staring off toward the west. Now she turned, laid a hand on his open shirt front and asked:

"The—stock, Cal... What happened?"

Cal Mason frowned as he told of the loss of the calf. He laid down his rifle and slipped an arm about Jane's shoulders, hugging her warmly.

"Just one of those things, hon," he said huskily. "There's wild critters, sure. But I'll find a way of besting them.... Meantime, we got meat aplenty. It'll be all right where I left it until morning. I'll hitch the team to

a stoneboat then an' you can come help me haul it home. Okay?"

Jane nodded and forced a smile, but her pale face showed her concern. Her shoulders quivered as she glanced about her. Though the wild Medicine Bow country was all-beautiful, it was frightening in its ruggedness, as frightening as the wild predators which had started their plunderings....

Cal told of seeing the big silvertip again, and of wounding the cougar.

"One day, an' it might be very soon, honey, I'll get that ol' grizzly, you wait an' see.... Now let's have a bait of food, huh?"

TOPSIDE in his favorite craglands, Chok cached his kill, mounding the remnants of the carcass over with what rubble he could scrape up. Seldom did any creature, save a venturesome weasel, move in to pilfer one of the big silvertip's caches.

He now moved on down to drink, and it was then he caught the blood tang, the death scent of the slain elk.

Chok needed much tallow under his hide against the long period of hibernation.

It lacked more than an hour till dusk and for some moments he swayed back and forth on the rimrock in a state of indecision. With that elk scent was a whiff of man scent.

Suddenly his great jaws gaped.

Acheeta, the cat, was weaving on down toward the boxed-in meadow, and Chok snarled fiercely. He dropped to all fours, moved on down a slide, to cross a small, fast-water creek. He flicked water with his tongue, but drank sparingly.

Piggy eyes flashing, Chok moved on, quickening his pace as the scents of elk and big cat strengthened. Though he detected man scent, it was not a live scent; it did not bring him much concern.

His anger and his hatred for Acheeta, his enemy, mounted as at last he poised himself in scrub brush above the small meadow.

His keen nose quivered at the strong cat smell, and now he glimpsed Acheeta. Her long tail was switching from side to side as, limping slightly, she circled the prone form of the cow elk carcass.

Acheeta's keen eyes were watching the slight motion of the man creature garment flung across the topside shoulder of the cow. The breeze was stirring the buckskin fringe. Time and time again she weaved about the kill, her jaws drooling, then suddenly she sprang forward. Chok heard her snarl of ecstacy, and then he heard her strong fangs tearing, ripping....

Muffling a low grunt, he slid on down to the bottomland, and crouched, weaved forward.

Acheeta's face was buried in the kill and ravenously she chewed and gulped.

When suddenly a twig cracked under one of Chok's paws, she whirled, but the great one was in the full momentum of attack.

Chok's monstrous jowls were rowelled, but his first thrust had rocked Acheeta back against the elk carcass.

Screeching, she fought with terrific fury, and in spite of her wound, slashed with all four clutches of rowelling talons.

Blood sopped into Chok's coat. He roared with pain as a claw almost tore an eye from its socket. But in all the hinterland there was no greater fighter than a grizzly bear.

He was not to be denied now this one great opportunity to manifest his power in attack. Again and again he felt the rip of those talons and although he suffered sharp raking, the wounds were only superficial. Acheeta was in no position to deliver a deep, fatal fang or talon blow.

Now Chok half rose, his big face a hideous mask as instantly he brought his sound right forearm forward and down in a smashing blow that stove in Acheeta's near shoulder.

Then Chok's tusks went into their terrible action and closed over the exposed throat of the queen cat.

Her tail flicked a few times and then she lay still, and Chok whirled, heaving her limp shape well away from the kill....

Yes, this was the range of Chok! He was indeed its chieftain, and now he weaved grandiosely about the elk carcass, moaning softly.

Turning in, he touched the man creature's garment delicately with claw tips, then suddenly roaring, he rushed in to seize it in his great jaws, to maul it before tossing it in shreds from him.

The sun had sunk deep into the gaping maw of a mountain pass to westward, and Chok stood for some time at his full height blinking, whimpering softly from the pain of his wounds. He had no vision left in his right eye, but his powerful heart still throbbed vigorously, attesting to his mounting anger and hatred.

Now he sniffed at the carcass, and dropped to all fours. Shortly his strong teeth ripped out a hind quarter. This he dragged clear of the main carcass, flicked it with his tongue, then cut some small succulent portions which he chewed and gulped to the accompaniment of throaty chortlings.

Later, Chok expertly severed the meaty quarter from its heavy leg bone. Seizing the flesh in his jaws, he wheeled and started up toward his bedground, leaving the dead lioness and the man creature's kill with his savage brand upon them....

In the first hour of full dusk, Chok stood beneath a small tumbling spring waterfall, letting the cold water flush out his wounds, bringing him surcease. Then he backed away to slump and curl to rest, as the deep wilderness night drew its dark mantle tighter over all....

●End

THE DESPERADOS

(*continued from page* 45)

the telephone calls, of course, and the heat, slanting in shaking waves from the rock walls of the cul-de-sac; the unhappy bawling of the thousand head of Herefords still remaining in the loading pens behind the shack; the pinching of the high-heeled boots, which he was determined to suffer until he became accustomed to them, and the slurring voice and the off-tune guitar of Hap, the foreman, cutting through the heat haze. Hap always picked the wrong time to hit the bottle.

'T was a calm and peaceful evenin' in a camp called Arapahoe
And the whiskey was a-runnin' with a soft and gentle flow;

Jimmy sighed and pushed himself up from the desk and walked to the open door, which hung loosely on old hinges. Trapped in the mountain pocket, the heat of the day slapped him with a physical force and he stood, dazed and blinking at the white light of the sun and of the dust which lay heavily on everything.

As his eyes adjusted to the contrast, they found the foreman slouched on the ground with his back against the wall of the shack. His wide, shapeless hat was tipped back and his head was bent low over the guitar, his stumped fingers nursing the music. His legs extended out from the scant shade of the roof overhand and his boots were white from the alkali of the trail.

A river of sweat ran down Jimmy's back and stopped at his belt line. He hitched at his new denim trousers and said, "Hap...Hap, can that, will you? I got to get this tally straight, and I can't do it with all this caterwauling. You should have gone down to Cartwheel on the handcar with the others."

Hap stopped singing and looked up at Jimmy, squinting half mockingly through still-young eyes implanted in a face as old and supple as worked leather beneath the stubble. The sun had bleached the whiskers out and

(*please turn to page* 118)

GUNHAWK

by JONATHAN CRAIG

IT WAS WARM and comfortable here in the rough shack he and George Webb had built when they first hit their strike, but outside the snow storm was turning into a blizzard and the scream of the wind clawing at the oil-paper window was like the cry of a cougar.

Seated there at the table, old Tom Sheldon broke the double barreled shotgun and squinted along its smooth bore at the light of the kerosene lantern, thinking fondly of the fried rabbit he was going to have as soon as the storm died down a little. He wished George Webb would get back from the settlement before the storm got any worse. George was young, and tough as whip-leather, but a Montana blizzard was nothing to take lightly.

Old Tom's seamed face softened in a grin as he thought of George's excuse for going out in the face of the storm.

"We're almost out of tobacco," George had said solemnly, and departed, looking a little flushed and nervous.

Tom's eyes touched the half dozen bags of burley that lay next to the pile of shotgun shells George had fetched from the settlement less than

Paxton was a gunfighter, accustomed to taking what he wanted by force. What he wanted now was a girl . . . . . .

a week ago, and his grin widened. Well, young bucks always acted funny when they wanted to slip off to see a girl. Seemed like a man noticed it all the more when the girl was his own daughter.

Tom always felt a certain warmth spread through him when he thought of his daughter Norma. He was glad she'd chosen young Webb. George would make a man a mighty good son-in-law, as well as a partner.

A boot kicked against the plank door. Tom put the shotgun down on the table and went to open it. That would be George, loaded down with victuals they didn't need. George was strictly head-in-the-clouds these days. Tom chuckled and jerked the door open.

The snow-covered figure in the doorway was big, almost big enough to fill it. From beneath his fur cap, small, cold eyes bored into Tom's. There was no mitten on his right hand. The hand held a .44 Peacemaker and it was pointed at Tom's chest.

Tom took a backward step. The man followed him, slamming the door behind him.

"Jud Paxton!" Tom said softly, incredulously.

"Sure," Paxton said. "Who'd you expect? You knew I'd come back." He gestured toward the chair Tom had just vacated. "Get back there and set down, Sheldon."

Sheldon moved back, sat down.

Jud Paxton stomped some of the snow off his boots. "Kind of push that shotgun off the table so's it won't tempt you none."

Tom did as he was told, wincing as the gun clattered on the floor. "It isn't loaded," he said. "I—"

"Never mind that. Where's George Webb, damn him?"

"He's down to the settlement."

"In this weather? You're lying, Sheldon!"

Tom shook his head. "No. He left an hour ago."

PAXTON studied him, worrying his lower lip between strong white teeth. "Maybe he is. You never could lie worth a hoot, Sheldon." He jerked his fur cap from his head and tossed it across the room. "Maybe it's better this way." He moved to the sheet-iron stove and stood with his back to it, watching Tom Sheldon with narrowed eyes. When he spoke again, his voice had gone down a notch; it was ominous, deadly.

"I've waited a long time for this," he said tightly. "Four years, Sheldon—and four years in the pen ain't no barbecque. They worked me like a mule all day and beat the living daylight out of me every night. And those cells, Sheldon—sleeping on the floor with the rats crawling around you. It's hell, Sheldon, plain hell."

The accumulated aches of sixty years of living was in Tom Sheldon's bones now; the shack was without warmth, and the screaming of the wind outside hurt his eardrums. He felt old and weak and helpless, and he knew that the look in Jud Paxton's eyes was the look of death. Death for him, and for George Webb. And Norma...? He shuddered, ran his tongue across dry lips. "How did you get out, Jud? You killed a man. You were supposed to be there for life."

Jud Paxton's laugh was short and bitter. "I *broke* out. How'd you think? I laid there with them rats night after night, thinking of nothing but getting out, and what I was going to do to two other rats when I did. You know who I mean, Sheldon."

Tom's palms were suddenly moist. He rubbed them slowly against the sides of his levis, shaking his head.

"You're all mixed up, Jud," he said. "It wasn't George Webb drove you out of town. It was your own self."

"He was yellow," Paxton said. "He wouldn't meet me with guns."

"No," Tom said. "He wouldn't. He's no gunfighter, like you. But you goaded him and baited him till he had to fight you. Only he did it with his

fists. It's no wonder he half killed you, the way you went for a knife when you saw you was getting whipped."

"I never started no trouble with him," Paxton said. "I told him to stay away from Norma. He—"

"That's something you didn't have the right to do," Tom told him. "Norma wasn't your girl, and never would have been. She knew what you were."

"Like hell!" Paxton grated. "She swallowed all the lies you told her, that's all!"

"They weren't lies, Jud. You were born mean—and Norma could see it just as well as anybody else. She never paid you no never-mind. Not once."

"You're too old to know what the hell's going on," Paxton said. "Norma was getting to an age where she needed a man. If it hadn't been for you and George and your cussed meddling, that man would have been me."

Tom Sheldon took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Nothing that George or I did sent you to the pen, Jud," he said patiently. "Folks laughed you out of town after George gave you that beating, but that isn't why you killed that man in Red Horse."

Paxton stared at Tom a long moment. There were cold fires behind his pale eyes. "He hoorawed me," he said. "He'd heard about the fight and he had to run his mouth about it. I stopped him." He moved the barrel of the Peacemaker in a lazy circle. "Where've you got it hidden, Sheldon?"

"Got *what* hidden?"

"The gold, you old fool! I got it through the grapevine that you haven't taken in so much as an ounce of the stuff to Red Horse in more than six weeks. There ain't no place to sell it in the settlement, so that means you've got it all right here. Where is it?"

"You heard wrong," Tom said. "George and me—"

"I told you you couldn't lie," Paxton grated. He came away from the stove, stepped close to Tom. "Once more—where is it?"

Tom's thin shoulders slumped. "If I tell you, will you take it and go? I know you mean to kill me, Jud, but there's no sense killing George. It's him I'm thinking of—him and Norma. What good will it do you to—"

"Shut up! Where's that gold?"

TOM GLANCED toward the rear of the shack. "Under that loose plank back there." He watched with blurring eyes while Paxton pried up the board and took out the dozen-odd leather bags from the space beneath. A strange light came into Paxton's eyes as they shuttled between the gold and the old man. He carried the bags to the front of the shack and dropped them on the floor near the door, but he kept his eyes on Tom and his finger through the trigger guard of the Peacemaker.

"George should be getting back from the settlement any time now," Paxton said. "I aim to greet him real proper." He took off his other mitten and ran his fingertips lovingly along the gun barrel. "With this." He smiled. "Too bad you won't be alive to see it."

"Jud," Tom said, "you're forgetting something."

"Maybe so, but it ain't nothing I care about."

"I think it is. It's Norma. I don't ask mercy for myself, and I know better than to ask it for George—but what about Norma? Think what this is going to do to her."

Jud Paxton leaned back against the wall and his big body shook with laughter. "I *am* thinking about it, and taking right smart pleasure in it. It'll teach her a damn good lesson."

"You know what happens to women out here when they don't have any men folks to look after them."

"Sure I know. It'll serve her right for what she done to me."

A nightmarish feeling of helpless anger surged through Tom Sheldon. It pained him when he took a breath and a sudden sweating lathed his ribs.

"I still ain't thawed out," Paxton

said. "Rustle up some coffee, and be quick about it."

Once, long ago, Tom had seen a puppet show at the opera house in Red Horse. He had taken Norma a tiny girl then, just before her mother died. He remembered those puppets now; he was acting like one of them, moving jerkily and uncertainly toward the table heaped with supplies from George's last trip to the settlement. There was no strength left in his legs, in his arms. There was just the numbing certainty that death was only minutes away....

He pawed through the shotgun shells and the canned goods and finally his groping fingers closed around the bag of coffee.

"Hurry up!" Paxton growled.

Tom stared down at the coffee, at the other things on the table. Half an hour ago he had been one of the happiest men in Montana, thinking only of shooting a rabbit for his dinner—and dreaming of his daughter's marriage to George Webb. And now....

"What's the matter with you?" Paxton said. "Get a move on!"

TOM FUMBLED a moment more at the table, and then he put coffee into the big coffee pot and walked on rubbery legs to the stove. He stood there, looking at the pot, listening to it begin to simmer, his blue-veined hands clinched hard against his thighs.

Behind him, Paxton laughed easily. "That storm's dying down. Good thing, too. I got a long way to go after I leave here."

Tom listened. It was true. The wind had softened to a low moan. George would be back any minute, now, if he had been waiting for a lull, or had taken shelter somewhere along the way.

Minutes passed. The only sound in the shack was Paxton's ragged breathing and the soft bubbling of the coffee pot.

"That's strong enough," Paxton said. "Take it over to the table and pour me a cup. And no tricks!"

The pot sat on a makeshift grating that took the place of the stove lid George had broken weeks ago. Flames licked up around the grating and around the bottom of the coffee pot. Every detail of it etched itself into Tom's memeory, filled his mind so that there was room for nothing else. Slowly, he leaned toward the stove and lifted the coffee pot. He turned and walked past Paxton toward the table.

The explosion shook the room—a shotgun blast that brought a startled yell from Paxton, jerked him around toward the blazing shower of sparks that erupted from the stove. The gun in his hand bucked twice, the bullets striking only sheet iron.

And as the gun went off, Tom Sheldon stepped in close and brought the coffee pot in a short arc that sent its scalding contents straight into Paxton's face.

Paxton screamed with pain. The Peacemaker thudded to the floor as his hands streaked to his tortured face, clawing at it, fingernails stripping the skin from it.

Tom scooped up the gun and backed away from the agonized killer. He knew what Paxton was going through, but there was nothing he could do for him, nothing at all.

Later that day, after the marshal had come from Red Horse to take Paxton to jail, old Tom made another pot of coffee—this time for George Webb and himself.

"It took a lot of nerve," George said admiringly. "I'm mighty proud of you."

Tom stirred his coffee and grinned. "It was just a crazy gamble, son. When I palmed that shotgun shell off the table, with the idea of dropping it in the fire when I took the coffee pot off the stove, I wouldn't have given a plugged nickel for my chances—or yours either." He shook his head reflectively. "Turned out to be the most expensive cup of coffee Jud Paxton ever hankered after."

THE BLOOD-LETTING

by LEWIS B. PATTEN

CHAPTER I

"SOMEDAY YOU'LL CROWD THE WRONG MAN"

FROM THE town of Ute Falls, the land rises steadily for twelve miles, through dry

NO MERE VENGEANCE SCOURGE HAD BUILT THIS ★ ★ BRAND NEW DRAMATIC BOOK-LENGTH

AT CANYON CREEK

grass and sage, until the air thins with altitude and you begin to notice change in the vegetation. The grass is longer up here and not so dry. The sage grows shorter, while the oak and sarvus seem to thrive. Pockets of pale green aspen fill the shady draws, giving shelter from afternoon

Frank Shasta thundered around a bend in the road . . .

In '85 they strung up a horsethief, in '87 a killer. And now they hustled Eb Lowe toward the same tree, because he was responsible for every cattleman on Canyon Creek being wiped out. But Frank Shasta knew that the trouble here could never be stopped with a hangnoose . . .

STAGGERING - LAST - BULLET SHOWDOWN! . . . . NOVEL! BY A TOPNOTCH WRITER! ★ ★

heat to the summer-brown deer, and every small gulch runs a stream of clear, cold water.

The man was riding upcountry when he spied the cow. She lay acoss the narrow, main-stream, damming the water with her body. He dismounted, a tall and thin man, narrow of hip from a life of riding, broad of shoulder from working with rope and iron. To windward of the carcass he squatted, and formed a cigarette from wheatstraw paper and dry, flake tobacco.

The cow was big, weighing close to eleven hundred pounds. Her hide was sleek and glossy. Good, hard, grass-fat made her contours smooth and rounded. She lay on her right side, and her brand, a Rafter GH, was plain on her hip. She had been dead less than two days.

There was the intent in Frank Shasta, as he rose, to drag the cow out of the stream, but then he noticed something odd about her. Blood from her mouth made a dark brown stain on the stream bank, and behind her foreleg was a large and angry lump, like a carbuncle or boil. Shasta grunted, "Hell, her trouble ain't poison weeds! It's something else."

He scowled at the carcass for a moment, then shrugging, got down his rope and put a loop over the cow's two hind feet. Drawing it tight, he mounted, dallied the rope and nudged his horse ahead until the rope grew taut.

The horse looked warily over his shoulder, then set his hooves and lunged ahead. The rope groaned with the strain, and the cow carcass slid slowly out of the water.

Dismounting again, Shasta loosened his loop and flipped it off. He coiled the rope deliberately, conscious of the approach of three other riders, but not looking up until the rough, arrogant voice reached down to stir familiar feelings of anger and resentment in him.

"What the devil you think you're doin', Frank? That's one of mine, ain't it?"

Shasta nodded, spraddle-legged, facing this big and rough-shod voice, trying to down the defiance that rose into his throat. Big Glen Hocking had a way about him, a way that grated on Shasta and always had. Hocking's manner was that of a man who accepted no one on equal terms, whose arrogance placed him head and shoulders above all those with whom he had contact. It was nothing more nor less than thinly veiled contempt.

Shasta said, "She's yours all right."

"What killed her?" Hocking's tone implied that Shasta was personally responsible. "Was it poison?"

"Never saw poison make 'em bleed from the mouth. Never saw poison put boils under their hides. I dragged her out of the water because I drink that water. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Hocking turned to the man behind him, a mirthless, triumphant grin on his florid face. "Feisty rooster, ain't he? Do you reckon he's still sore because Rose run him off?"

The man snickered. Anger flared in Frank Shasta, showing in his narrowed eyes, in his tightened jaw. Glen Hocking could always prod a man where it would hurt. Frank said evenly, "I could pull you off that horse and hammer the sneer off your ugly face, but it wouldn't change you. Someday, though, you'll crowd the wrong man, and you'll crowd him too far." Hocking's taunting smile stopped him.

"Are you threatening me, Frank?"

Frank snorted disgustedly, and rose to his saddle. He could hate Glen Hocking, as most of the country did, but he could not hate Hocking's daughter, Rose, for taking her father's side. He rode downcountry, hearing Hocking's jeering laugh and holding his back stiff and straight. It hurt him to think of Rose, to think of the harshness of his last words to

her. It hurt him to think that she was lost to him forever.

Helpless anger burned him, took him on past his own neat cabin and toward the town of Ute Falls, for the forgetfulness a man could find in the company of others. The dead cow was gone from his mind, forgotten in the poignant memories that crowded over him. But she would be remembered again. Her death would stir this country to a bitter violence that could leave no man untouched. Perhaps it was premonition that put such a feeling of morose sourness on Frank Shasta. Perhaps it was his thinking of Rose, and his longing for her. But as he rode, the hard planes of his face deepened and set in a pattern of bitterness....

THE TOWN of Ute Falls lay at the lower end of this long valley, where the now sizeable creek flowed into Blue River. Its buildings were of weather-grayed frame, false fronted and ugly. Along Maple street, one block off Main, were the residences of the town's business people, and off Main on the other side was the inevitable shacktown.

Shasta tied his horse in front of the Blanco saloon, a sudden odd reluctance in him, a reluctance to go inside. Summer sunlight lay in this drowsy street, warm and enveloping. Tall maples to the east of town waved their leaves gently in the light breeze. Dust rose from a freighter's wagon as it rumbled into town off the Rawlins road. A dog ran yapping beside the freighter's mule teams until it tired of this sport and laid down to loll, tongue wagging, in the warm dust of midstreet.

Shasta saw the lithe, woman-shape of Nell Briscoe on the other side of the street, coming toward him. She caught his eye, smiled, and crossed over through the thick dust. Warmth lay in her eyes, and a flush of pleasure ran across her cheeks.

"Hello Frank. It's been a long time. What brings you to town today?"

She had this odd effect on Frank —that of making him forget his troubles in the warmth of her liking and approbation. Yet there was in her too much willingness, too little restraint, and it had its way of embarassing him. She was a tall girl, with honey-hair drawn back and gathered in a bun at her neck. Her skin was white and translucent, marred by an occasional, attractive freckle. Her breasts were full, and she thrust them forward proudly as she walked.

He grinned at her. "I get tired every so often of looking at the same four walls. I get tired of my own company."

"Well, come to dinner then. Tonight. Dad's going to that old lodge meeting of his and we'll have the house to ourselves." She blushed, still smiling, and lowered her glance. Frank could feel color rising to his own cheeks, so plain was her implication. But he could scarcely refuse.

He said, "All right. Thanks."

Nell raised blue eyes full of impish mischief to his, smiled again and turned. She recrossed the street, conscious of his glance upon her and allowing her hips to sway a bit more than was usual because of this. Frank watched her go, and now wished he could have avoided this invitation. Yet even through his reluctance was excitement as he thought of how warm and how willing could be Nell's kisses. He shook his head impatiently and turned into the saloon.

Along one wall stretched the poker tables, green-topped and vacant at this hour of the day. From the dimly lit rear half of the saloon came the click of billiard balls. Behind the scarred bar, Sam Podall, unshaven and blurry-eyed from partaking of his own wares, chewed a short cigar and nursed a mug of flat beer. Frank moved to the bar and hooked his boot over the brass rail. He murmured, "Beer, Sam, but none of that flat stuff you're drinking. I went to bed last night so I feel good today."

Sam slid a foaming glass down the bar. He said, "If I was in the grocery business, I'd get fat. I just can't seem to stay away from anything I don't have to pay for."

Sam Podall was ugly as sin, but his broken-toothed grin had an engaging quality that made men like him. It was, perhaps, not the grin at all, nor any outward aspect of the man, but his inner kindness and liking for his fellowmen that drew them to him. Frank gulped the beer, its warmth stealing through him, and Sam slid him another.

THE BATWINGS opened briefly, and sunlight laid its fleeting pattern across the littered floor. A man stepped to the bar beside Frank, a threadbare, thinfaced and sour man. Sam Podall grunted, "Mornin', Doc. Beer?"

Eb Lowe nodded, unsmiling. He said, his voice sharp and dry, "Calling me Doc is like accusing you of abstinence. I've been in this damned country for a year and the only time I've been called was when that high-priced studhorse of Hocking's broke his leg. I fixed that, didn't I? Maybe the horse can't run any more, but he's still breeding Hocking's mares, which was what Glen wanted."

Sam raked foam off a beerglass with a polished stick and slid the glass to Lowe. "A cattleman is an independent cuss. He gets used to treating his own sick stock and it's hard to show him how he can make money by callin' in somebody else."

Lowe, still bitter, raised his voice. "I spent two years learning to be a vet. Now I've spent another learning that you can't make a living at it. Anybody know who's hiring riders?"

Frank Shasta laid a five dollar gold piece on the bar. "I do my own riding, and haven't enough to hire help. But you can earn that five by answering a question for me."

Lowe looked at the gold, his eyes plainly evaluating it in terms of groceries and beer. He said, "Fire away. You could have bought any answer in my head for a tenth of that."

"What is it that kills a cow and makes her bleed at the mouth? A big fat cow. What is it that puts boils under her hide?"

A guarded caution came over Eb Lowe. He pushed the five back toward Frank, and there seemed to be less regret in him at this action than there should have been. Frank raised puzzled eyes, surprising a look of near elation on the vet's face. Eb said, "That's too fast and hard a question to answer right off. I got to see the cow. Where is she?"

"Hocking's range. She was damming the main flow of Canyon Creek and I dragged her out this morning. You follow the creek up ten-twelve miles and you can't miss her."

"Wolves been at her?"

"Not yet. Guess they ain't found her yet."

Eb Lowe muttered, "I'll get my horse," and swung away from the bar. A tall and gangling awkward man, his haste was ludicrous. The batwings closed behind him. Sam Podall emitted a low whistle. "He left his beer! I'd say Doc knows what killed that cow. I'd say offhand Doc was a little upset."

But Frank Shasta's mind had returned to Glen Hocking, and to his daughter, Rose. He nodded absently, fully aware that forgetfulness was not to be easily found. Considering this, he knew at last that he did not want to forget Rose, that he could never forget her even if he wanted to. Depression returned to weight his thoughts, and this day, that was to have given him a measure of forgetfulness, stretched endlessly ahead of him.

CHAPTER II

SCOURGE

EB LOWE, walking swiftly, reached the tarpaper shack in a couple of minutes. Behind the sagging, one-room building was a small corral, built of odds and

ends of scrap lumber, that housed a single horse. Eb saddled swiftly, with shaking fingers, and mounting, headed out of town and up Canyon Creek at a gallop.

Now that his plan was reaching fruition, its very daring began to frighten him and for a few short minutes he considered turning his horse and riding forever out of this country. Then stubbornly he shook his head, muttering, "I'm hanged if I will. They'll pay me a living in this country before I leave it. They'll be begging me to help them."

Half a dozen times before had he made this ride, in early morning before dawn pushed its first gray down the slopes of the divide to the east. The first few innoculations had been unsuccessful, as Eb Lowe had feared they might be. He did not have at his disposal the means to actually infect an animal with anthrax, only the vaccine to cure it, and all of the innoculations had been made with this vaccine which sometimes, and apparently had in this case, actually caused the disease.

Now, Eb felt like a man who has unleashed a monster, which might if not fought desperately and endlessly, destroy the country and the man who had unleashed it.

For anthrax is one of the most terrible and feared of livestock diseases. It spreads in a myriad of ways, by wolves and coyotes who eat the flesh of the infected animals, by streams used to irrigate, by hay irrigated from these streams, by flies. Most horrible of all is the fact that it will maintain itself in soil for years, infecting every animal who eats of grass from the infected soil.

Riding steadily, Eb Lowe reached the spot where Frank Shasta had dragged the cow from the stream earlier today, in a couple of hours. As he rode up, a coyote slunk snarling away from the carcass. Eb snatched his rifle from the boot, snapped a shot at the mangy and shedding animal. The coyote yelped and streaked into the brush.

Eb dismounted, though he would not have needed to, and walked around the bloating carcass, noting the swelling on the cow's side, the dried blood in her mouth. He noted, too, the abrasions Shasta's rope had made on her hind feet, and the tracks of Hocking and his two riders on the ground.

Paler, his hands shaking, he mounted again and set out at a steady lope along the plain tracks left by Hocking in the damp ground. They led upcountry, and took Eb Lowe eventually, by a circuitous route, into Hocking's ranch yard.

This place was different than most of the ranches along Canyon Creek. The log ranchhouse spread out, a full hundred feet wide, and a porch ran along its width in front. Climbing up trellises to right and left of the porch steps, were scarlet roses, blooming in profusion. A girl stood on the ground beside the steps, and as Eb watched, she plucked a rose, held it to her nose for a moment, then pinned it in her hair.

She turned at Eb's approach, a small and dark-haired girl, perhaps too still of face this bright summer day. Her eyes were dark and sparkling and the rose was a splash of exotic color against her hair. She wore a dress of blue-checked gingham that molded itself to her tiny waist and full breasts and exposed her white throat and the golden locket that hung there.

Eb cleared his throat. "Mornin', ma'am. Your pa to home?"

"I think he is. He rode in a while ago. I expect he's down at the corrals somewhere."

Eb stared at her, her beauty stirring longings in his dry and crackling soul until she dropped her glance in embarrassment. Then he turned his horse and rode slowly toward the monstrous barn and the spreading corral beside it.

GLEN HOCKING, big and fair-haired, and another man, he found hanging a new gate. Hocking's

florid face streamed with sweat, and exertion made the veins of his face stand out in sharp relief. Hocking was holding up the end of the gate while the other tried vainly to lower the opposite end onto both hinge pins at once.

Hocking snapped impatiently, "Doc, get down an' grab aholt of the end of that gate. Help him put it on the pins. The blame fool's been tryin' for ten minutes to git 'em both in place at once, an' I'm gittin' tired of holdin' this end up."

Eb slid off his horse and steadied the gate while Hocking's rider lowered it onto the hinge pins. Hocking swung the gate shut, grunting his satisfaction at the way it hung. Then, mopping his face with a blue bandanna, he turned to face Eb Lowe.

"What brings you clear up here, Doc?"

Eb cleared his throat, which now felt horribly dry. He said, "Mr. Hocking, you got a case of anthrax in your herd."

"Anthrax? What the devil's anthrax?"

This was something Eb Lowe had not considered, this utter ignorance of the disease and of its dangers. He felt momentarily at a loss. "You never heard of it? Hell man, it's the worst thing that can hit a country. If somethin' ain't done, it'll sweep through your herd like a prairie fire."

Hocking snorted, "Poppycock! What you doin', Doc, trying to drum up some business?"

Eb Lowe swallowed. Anger began to build in him and his face turned slowly red. He said with less judgement and control than he should have used, "You brainless fool, I'll tell you what anthrax is. It gets in water an' every critter that drinks the water dies. It gets on the ground an' every animal that eats the grass dies. There's a coyote been eatin' on that carcass down there, an' everywhere that coyote goes, he takes the disease with him. I took a shot at him, but I only creased him."

Some of the unbelieving humor went out of Hocking's face, but doubt still lingered there. "What's a man supposed to do about it?"

"Burn or bury the carcass first of all. Vaccinate the rest of your animals."

Hocking stared at him for a moment, then his beefy face broke into an unpleasant grin. Eb Lowe shifted his feet uneasily under the big man's steady scrutiny. Finally Glen Hocking began to laugh. His laugh rolled across the yard, raucous and mocking, and startled a bunch of chickens into a loud, cackling run. He roared, "Git out of here, you scrawny, dried up imitation of a man. You think I'll fall for a story like that? You've starved to death tryin' to sell this country the idea of lettin' you treat their sick stock. Because I was chump enough to let you splint that stallion's leg, you think you can shove a scheme like this down my throat. It won't work. It won't work at all, Doc."

A sick and empty feeling seeped into Eb Lowe's stomach. He swallowed his choked pride and stood his ground. "I tell you you'll lose every animal you got!" he screamed. "Every blamed stockman in the country will lose his herd. If the thing gets started it'll be ten years before a cow can live in this country."

Hocking's face turned redder. "Fork your hoss, damn you! Git off my land an' don't come back! My cattle are my business, an' I'm the one that'll tend to 'em. Now move!"

Eb Lowe swung a leg over his saddle. A new thought occurred to him. "Maybe the cowmen downstream from you will have somethin' to say about this. Maybe they won't like a disease as awful as anthrax coming down Canyon Creek from your rotten herd. Anthrax can kill a man too, did you know that?"

Hunching his shoulders like a bull, Hocking moved toward Eb. Menace lay behind his glittering eyes. Eb dug spurs into his startled horse's ribs and thundered from the yard,

tossing only a passing glance at the startled Rose. Eb Lowe alone, could not kill the monster he had loosened. He had to have help. Now that help was denied him unless...

He thought of Frank Shasta, who had found the carcass, who had offered the gold piece for information this morning. His horse was tired, but still Eb Lowe crowded him down the trail. Anthrax moved fast. Eb Lowe had to move faster.

CHAPTER III

WITH OR AGAINST?

FRANK SHASTA pushed open the door of Halliday's feed store, and came out onto the boardwalk. He stood for a moment, squinting against the glare of mid-afternoon. At the edge of the walk, he built a cigarette and inclined his head as he cupped a match and held the flame against its end.

He saw the awkward shape of Eb Lowe as the man rode into town, elbows flapping with the horse's trotting motion. Eb came straight up the street, his horse flecked with foam, and soaked with sweat. Curiosity held Frank motionless, waiting.

Eb hauled his mount to a halt before Frank, and the animal slumped into a dead tired and hipshot stance. Eb, not dismounting, said hoarsely, "I'll take that fiver now an' the beer's on me."

Frank smiled shrugging slightly, and fished in his pocket. "What killed her?"

"Anthrax."

"What's that?"

"Oh Lord! You don't know either?"

" 'Fraid not. Should I?"

"You will. You live downstream from Hocking. That cow was in the water. Your cattle can catch the disease by drinking from Canyon Creek."

Alarm stirred in Frank Shasta. "What's Hocking say about it?"

"He run me off. Said I was tryin' to drum up business."

The knot of inevitable loafers on the bench before the feed store stirred and gave their wandering attention to this conversation. One of them rose, Jake Halldorson, and the oldster ambled up beside Frank Shasta. Jake rolled the cud of plug tobacco from one cheek to the other spat, then tugged at the ends of his drooping mustache to dry them. He croaked, "Ain't but one way to cure cattle of anthrax. You got to slit their briskets an' tie a bit of rope in the hole you've made. Keeps the pizen drainin' out."

Eb Lowe snorted disgustedly. "You're thinkin' of Blackleg, Jake. Besides, that's an old wives' tale an' won't work at all. They got vaccines now."

Frank Shasta, thinking that the news of this disease would travel the country like a grass fire said shortly, "I'll take that beer now, Eb." Impatient anger ran through him. Crossing the street he muttered, "Now that Jake's got the story, how long do you think it'll be before every blamed cowman in the country knows it?"

"It'll be a good thing if they do. Somethin's got to be done fast or there won't be a beef critter left. Hocking won't vaccinate. Said I was tryin' to drum up business."

"You got the stuff to vaccinate with?"

"Sure I got it." Eb would have said more, but some odd thought stopped him. He ducked his head and scurried toward the saloon, and puzzling at this abrupt change in the man, Frank followed.

Inside, twisting his beer glass reflectively on the bar, Shasta asked, "What would it cost a man to vaccinate?"

This descent to the practical seemed to confuse Eb Lowe momentarily. He calculated for a moment and finally said, "If 'twas a man's

whole herd, I'd say fifty cents a head."

Shasta drank his beer. Some peculiarity about this whole business troubled him and made him say, "I'll think on it. Let you know first thing in the morning."

He turned to go, tall and lanky, but with an odd and feline grace to his movements. Eb Lowe touched his elbow with a restraining hand. "There's more to it than vaccination. Carcasses have to be buried or burned. Once in a while the vaccine will give an animal the disease instead of protecting him from it. Every hour that cow of Hocking's lays up there, the danger gets worse."

Frank said, "I can't deal with Hocking," pulled away from Eb and went out the door. Once more his thoughts went to Rose, and turned bitter. Such a small thing, it had been, that brought on the quarrel—an argument with Hocking over that brindle heifer and the brand she wore. Clipping the heifer's hair would have settled the argument once and for all, but Hocking had been characteristically arrogant. "You'll clip no heifer of mine, hang you! I've suspected for a long time that you was brandin' calves with your brand when their mothers wore mine."

HE WAS referring to the time, half a dozen years past, when, in honest error, Frank had misbranded a calf. Shasta said patiently, but with his anger choking him, "I vented my brand on that one, and put yours on."

"After you got caught! But how many times have you got away with it?"

Frank hit him then. Pounded and hammered and beat him back until the gunbarrel of one of Hocking's rider's stopped him. Hocking had forbidden him to see Rose, had forbidden her to see Frank. And Rose, torn between Hocking and Frank, had chosen to stay loyal to her father.

Afternoon wore itself away into early evening, and the sun dropped behind the cedar hills to the west of town, flaming briefly, then bowing to the drifting soft gray that settled over the country like a down comforter. Knots of men stood before the hotel and the saloon, and their talk, while soft, was full of concern and could presage nothing but trouble. It was the talk of men who are slow to rouse, slow to anger. But along with this talk was a rising panic that showed now only in their eyes, in the nervous gestures of their hands.

Walking toward the square, two-storied house where Nell Briscoe lived with her father, Frank Shasta caught snatches of this talk.

"I'm irrigatin' out of Canyon Creek right now. If what Doc says is true, I'm pollutin' every danged spear of hay I expect to put up."

"Doc is comin' up t'morrow to vaccinate my bunch. But he ain't goin' t' be able t' git 'em all at once."

"Hell, Hocking's the one that's got the danged disease. If he won't vaccinate an' bury his dead stock, we'd ought to make him do it!"

Drawn by the news, more men drifted into town. Lamps winked in the dim recesses of the stores along Main. A yell drifted down the street from the Blanco, and turning his head, Frank Shasta saw the dim shapes of two men, fighting in front of the saloon. The knots of talking men broke up, moving toward the commotion, and Frank shrugged as he climbed the steps onto Nell's porch.

Vague uneasiness troubled him, as though he sensed that this talk was only preliminary, leading slowly but inevitably to the flare-up of violence that could not but follow it.

HE KNOCKED and Nell Briscoe, flushed from the stove's heat, and wearing a bright yellow apron, came to the door, smiling and suddenly shy. "Come in, Frank. I've steaks cooking, and rolls in the oven." She

stepped back as he entered, but not enough and his entrance put him close to her. He could see the quickened rise and fall of her breasts, the flush of anticipation that rose to her cheeks. He caught her to him, roughly and hungrily, and lowered his hard mouth to her eager and parted lips.

Her violence startled him. Soft and warm was her mouth, but it had its quality of urgent possessiveness. Her arm flung about his neck, fingers digging in, and her body arched against him.

He was breathing hard as she drew away. Excitement and plain animal desire was molten lava in his veins. But Nell was smiling again, saying, "Mmmm. You do that like you meant it." Turning, she darted toward the kitchen. "My steaks are burning. I'll have them on in a minute."

White linen covered the table. A candle burned softly at either end. The steaks were done the way he liked them, crisp and very brown outside, rare and steaming inside. He ate ravenously, but he kept his eyes on Nell across from him, turned shy now by his scrutiny. For a while he forgot Doc and Hocking and Rose, forgot the cattle and the trouble that was making on the street of Ute Falls. When dinner was finished, Nell excused herself, and when she returned, she was wearing a dress of red silk, tight-fitting and sheer, that showed each delicious curve of her body. She snuggled beside him on the sofa and he slipped a hand about her waist.

It was almost as though the silk was not there. Her body was hot and soft and trembling beneath his hands. With a little moan she turned to him, raising her lips, and her breath hurried in and out, fragrant and eager.

All thought, everything but instinct went out of Frank Shasta. He caught her to him, bruising and fierce, and she seemed to revel in this roughshod way of his.

She stiffened as steps sounded on the porch, pulled away and sat up as a voice rushed muffled through the thick-paneled door, "Frank! Frank Shasta, you in there?"

With a muttered curse, Frank rose. He shot an apologetic glance at Nell and surprised a look of utter rage on her face. This look disturbed him, shocked him, and he went to the door scowling.

Outside on the darkened porch stood a man, and further, below the steps, Frank could see half a dozen more. The man on the porch, recognizable from his rasping loud voice, was Frank's neighbor on the down-creek side, Utah Benson. He said "We're holdin' a meetin' down to the feed store. We got to get together on this anthrax thing. You comin'?"

Frank muttered, "Be there in five minutes." He watched the shape of Utah Benson and the others retreat into the black night and heard their diminishing, outraged voices. He turned to Nell. "They're getting excited now. They're getting worked up enough to do something."

He could see the determined effort she made for control, but the evidences of her temper were still in her and killed the excitement in him. He murmured, "It was a good dinner, Nell. Damn the interruption anyway," and tried to smile.

Nell had mastered her temper and now came to him, smiling. She put herself close to him, but somehow, there was not the thrill in her nearness that there had been before. She spoke softly, "When will I see you, Frank?"

He hedged, "Way things look, I can't tell, Nell. First time I get to town, though, I'll come by." He moved away, and found his hat. Cramming it onto his head, he went out, trying to avoid the appearance of haste. Outside, he grinned wryly to himself and muttered, "Now you know how a mouse feels when he ducks into his hole an inch ahead of the cat."

HALLIDAY'S Feed Store was crammed to overflowing with angry, shouting men. Shasta's entrance was greeted with yells of, "Where you standin' in this, Frank?"

They were considering Frank's tie with Rose and for a moment, Frank was considering it too. He could admit to himself, now that the showdown had arrived, that he had never given up hope of a reconciliation with Rose. And he was realizing, in this moment, that if he threw himself in with these neighbors of his against Hocking, Rose would consider his action as vengefulness, and that the dim chance of making up with her would be forever gone.

Yet to stand back was the evasive action of a coward, and Frank could not but admit that these men were entirely justified in their fear of the dread disease. At the far end of the hall a man yelled, "You're for us or you're agin us. Make up your mind. Whatever you do, we're still goin' ahead. Hocking's goin' t' vaccinate, or by all that's holy we'll shoot every blamed critter on his range!"

Frank shouted, "I'm with you. I stand to lose as much as any of you." By his words he knew that he had picked his path and that Rose would be forever something lovely that could have happened to him but never did.

Now the planning began, broken by bickering, by argument, by lack of an effective leader. Finally, shrugging, Frank assumed that role, and agreed to head a delegation to Hocking in the morning to attempt to persuade him to co-operate in measures designed to control or stamp out the disease. But there was no hope in him of success, for he knew Hocking's stubborn and arrogant nature, and he knew that the very appearance of pressure would turn Hocking bull-headed. The road up Canyon Creek was long, his cabin would be lonely, and there was no hope in him now that it would ever be anything else.

CHAPTER IV

HOCKING

CANYON CREEK made a soft and steady murmur in the still night air as Frank Shasta rode into his yard. Hearing him, the milch cow bellowed plaintively in the corral, and her calf, penned away from her, heard this and bawled. Frank offsaddled his horse and turned him out to pasture. Then, lifting a bucket off a nail on the fence, he squatted and milked out the cow's two front teats, leaving the hind two for the calf. Carrying the half-full bucket, he trudged toward the cabin. The calf's hungry grunting and impatient butting were soft and pleasant sounds behind him.

The door was ajar. Frank pushed it open, from long habit put the bucket on the table in darkness without thought or conscious searching. Then he moved across the room and wiped a match alight on the seat of his jeans. He lifted the lamp chimney high enough to touch flame to the wick, then lowered it back into place.

Something turned him now toward the bed, some odd, animal instinct, and he started momentarily, a tall and thin man whose angular face missed ugliness only because of the serenity and gentleness that was in it. He shoved his hat back on his head, took a step toward this girl and then stopped, hesitating. "Rose! What the devil are you doing here?"

She sat on the edge of his bed, looking small, looking scared. "Frank, what is this disease Dad's cattle have? Is it as serious as the veterinarian claims it is? Will it spread downcreek to you and the others?"

"If it is what Eb Lowe claims it is, it will. Eb seems to be sure enough." Moving with impatient and nervous quickness, he performed the habitual chores of coming home. He slid the lid off the stove, shook down the ashes, shaved a stick of

kindling into the box and lighted the fire.

Then he whirled, determination showing through his hesitancy. "Rose, hang it, did you come down here at this hour of the night to talk to me about anthrax?" His question was blunt, his tone blunter. And this was not what he intended. He wanted to show her all the things he felt when he looked at her; he wanted to tell her how hard it was to stand here in the center of the room, when all he could think of was reaching her, seizing her, holding her in his arms.

She got up, small and delicately made, but with strength in her for all of that. "What will you do? What will the others do if Dad refuses to treat his herd?"

He scowled and countered with a question of his own, "What will you do, Rose? Will you stand by Glen whether he's right or wrong? Do you have to make it a choice between Glen and me? A man does what is right, what he has to do, and I did not build up my herd, nor the others theirs, to see them wiped out by Glen's stubbornness."

Indecision was plain in Rose and her dark eyes grew large and troubled. Frank followed his advantage with necessary cruelty. "Do you think I stole cattle from your father, Rose?"

"I shouldn't have come. I should have stayed away."

"Do you think I could steal from your father and go on seeing you?"

Now the tears came, welling from behind her eyes and spilling over onto her smooth and flushed cheeks. "Frank, stop it! Stop torturing me! Of course I don't think that!"

He moved across the room now, and she fitted snugly and warmly in his arms. Her tears flowed unchecked and her arms about him were fierce and frantic. "Frank, what can we do, what can we do?"

His voice was gentle. "We can do what we have to do, and nothing else. Give things time to work themselves out, Rose. In the meantime, do what you can with Glen, because he's wrong this time—dead wrong."

"I know it, Frank. He's wrong this time and he was wrong before." The hysteria went slowly out of her and her body ceased to tremble. For a fleeting instant her arms tightened and she pressed herself close to him, but then she dropped her arms and stepped resolutely away. "There is no use in either of us torturing ourselves. Show me where you keep your ham and eggs, Frank, and I'll cook some breakfast."

AS THOUGH she belonged here, she set about the preparation of breakfast. Frank kept watching her every graceful movement, kept wishing he could hold her here forever. But he held his silence, for he could appreciate her feeling of loyalty to Hocking, could realize that she would never be happy unless she could come to him with her father's approval, or at least his consent.

He sat down across from her, silent because there was no light conversation in him and because the things he was thinking must not be said. He watched her ride out up-creek, and raised a hand in reluctant farewell. As he turned back toward his cabin, the peaks to the east silhouetted themselves against the first faint light of dawn.

He went inside then, sat at the table with the dishes Rose had used before him and drank black, bitter coffee until the loss of last night's sleep was forgotten and until the sun stained the thin clouds overhead a bright, fiery orange. He should have been jubilant over his reconciliation with Rose, but he was not. The old adage, "Red sky in the morning, sailor take warning," kept running insanely through his mind.

Frank Shasta stood squarely between two fires today, and knew not which way to turn. How could he fight Hocking, knowing it would hurt Rose? Yet how could he turn his back on his neighbors, knowing they were in the right."

There was no solution but trouble, no apparent answer but bloodshed and powdersmoke. Glen Hocking was what he was, and he would not change. Neither could there be compromise on the part of the smaller ranchers. The rain and wind promised by the fiery sky would be dwarfed by the storm of human passions which today must unleash.

Eventually, shrugging, Frank Shasta rose, buckled on his Colt's .44 and belt, and went out to saddle his horse and to wait for the arrival of those who were to accompany him to Hocking's today. He would do his best, and no man could do more.

With a pan of oats, he caught the gentle, spotted pony he had ridden the day before, on him he roped the bigger, tougher black far out in the pasture. Leading him, he came back, and as he finished hanging saddles, Utah Benson rode into the yard with four others behind him.

Utah was a short, broad man, whose voice was harsh and rasping, and who had no sense of humor at all. In the strictest sense of the word, he was a good neighbor, but he was no company for a lonely man. Frank rose to his saddle, noting the presence of revolver and belt at each man's waist, the rifles nearly hidden in their saddle boots. Eb Lowe rode at the tail end of the column, elbows flapping, and something akin to cold fear tracing its ugly finger across his sour features.

Shasta said as they left the yard, "We will get nowhere at all with threats, so don't use them," but even as he spoke he could sense the mental reservation that was in these men at his words.

No compromise was in them, only the panic of epidemic, only cold fear of the loss of everything they had built up over the years.

Utah Benson said stolidly and resolutely, "He will listen to us or we will make him listen. I for one do not intend to have my cattle catch this thing if it can be avoided."

MORE FOR the purpose of taking their minds from Hocking than for any other reason, Frank put a question to Lowe, "How do you reckon the disease got started here, Doc? Seems kind of funny."

Eb Lowe, unnecessarily shrill, barked, "What you tryin' to say, Shasta? Anthrax comes to a country in any of a thousand ways. Don't be suggesting anything."

Frank was taken aback, but, viewing the vet's obvious proddiness, he held his silence. Benson rasped, "What the devil's eatin' you, Doc? Scared?" He laughed loudly and harshly. Eb Lowe stiffened as though to protest, but then he subsided into his saddle, and to Frank it seemed that a secret satisfaction lurked in his bony face. But all he said was, "Maybe I am. Maybe I don't like gunplay an' fightin'."

This way, bickering and nervous on the prod, the six of them passed through the gate in Frank Shasta's fence and came onto Glen Hocking's range. At eight-thirty they came to the dead cow and all dismounted to examine her, carefully, from the windward side, for the sweet, cloying odor of decaying flesh was near overpowering.

Satisfied, they set about gathering dry wood from the brush thickets nearby and piling it over and around the carcass. From his saddle, Utah took down a gallon can of coal oil with a potato over its spout, and drenched both cow and woodpile with it. When Doc was satisfied with the size of the woodpile they had gathered, he nodded at Benson and Utah tossed a match at the mass.

For an instant at the matchflame burned alone in the pile. Then, with a mounting roar, the whole thing caught, sending its billowing cloud of black smoke into the overcast sky. There was the strong smell of coal oil in the air, the smell of its oily

smoke. There was the odor of woodsmoke and of frying flesh.

The fascination of the flames was upon these men, momentarily obscuring their purpose. They watched until the heat drove them back, back to their snorting and nervous horses fifty yards away. Yet even here, Frank could feel the searing heat of the fire.

At nine-thirty, not a quarter mile from Glen Hocking's ranchhouse, they found the second carcass.

This was a steer, a yearling, but under the hide of its belly was the same odd lump, and blood had run from its mouth.

Now, the obscure fear that rode Eb Lowe showed in the man more strongly, but in the others, there was only an increasing grim quiet. With little talk, they again built their brushy funeral pyre over the steer and drenched it with coal oil. But at this one, they did not pause to watch.

At eleven they came into Glen Hocking's yard, and at the same time it began to rain, a slow drizzle that carried the chill of its high-country origin, and that laid on their horses' hides and on their clothes in tiny, glistening droplets.

Utah Benson, his voice taking authority from Frank, bellowed toward the house, "Hocking!"

The grim knot of ranchers and the terrified veterinarian rode stubbornly toward the house and held their milling horses before the wide steps, before the flaming roses on either side.

Hocking came onto the porch, his face showing knowledge of their purpose, but also showing his will and his unbending stubbornness. He said, "Get out of my yard! Get off my land! The next man that shoves his nose into my business will get something he didn't bargain for!"

No blustering. No shouting. Before Benson could frame his reply, Hocking turned back through the door and slammed it behind him.

CHAPTER V

THE SAME TREE

DOC LOWE left the group at the edge of town, turning now toward the tarpaper shack and the ramshackle corral behind it. He turned his horse into the corral, forked down some hay, and trudged wearily toward the house. Depression put a sag to his bony shoulders, for this was not turning out at all as he had planned it.

So far, all he had stirred up was trouble, and with the exception of John Rance, who wanted his ten head vaccinated, no one had mentioned employing Doc to vaccinate. He entered his cabin and headed for the stove, but as he slid the lid off his eye caught sight of the mess on the floor. The antiseptic odor of vaccines and medicines filled the room. The door of the wooden cabinet where he kept these things was ajar, but the cabinet was empty. All of Doc's anthrax vaccine made a wet stain on the floor amid the litter of broken bottles. A hammer lay in the center of the mess.

For an instant, Eb Lowe stood silent and still. Then rage seeped slowly into his eyes, turned his face scarlet, made the veins stand out on his forehead. His eyes took on the wild look of madness. Everything Eb Lowe had in the world was invested in those countless tiny vials of vaccine. His future was tied up in them, and the salvation of the Canyon Creek country. Who could—who would be so vicious as to destroy them?

Now, suddenly, flight was the only thought in Eb Lowe's head. With shaking hands, he shaved a stick of kindling onto the floor, piled sticks of wood over it. He touched a match to the pile, snatched what few clothes he had from the untidy pile on the bed, and, tying them into a bundle as he ran, he made his way back out to the corral. He had the

sweated and weary horse saddled and was swinging into the saddle when Frank Shasta approached down the alley.

Without preamble, Frank asked, "Doc, how much vaccine have you got? How many cattle can you vaccinate?"

Doc, panic putting a cold chill in his bones, shot a glance toward his shack. Smoke poured already from the open door, but Shasta had his back to the shack and had not yet noticed it.

Eb Lowe had too much guilt, and too much fear in him to put on a bold front, to play for time in which to escape. His laugh was high and shrill, but it broke and became a babble. He shouted, "I can't vaccinate a single blamed critter! You hear that? *I can't vaccinate one poddy calf!* You know why? Because somebody sneaked in my place this morning while we was gone an' broke every bottle I had with a hammer!

"I'm gittin' the devil out of this country. What do I owe you anyway? I've starved an' gone without ever since I came here because nobody'd call me in to treat their stock." His hand flung back and came up holding his gun, its muzzle trembling and bearing on Frank.

The wind shifted and put a cloud of smoke from the flaming cabin between the two. Amazement in Frank Shasta's face gave way to rage. His hand shot toward his gun, and it came up, hammer thumbed back. But his eyes were watering and the smoke put a spasm of coughing on him.

Through the smoke he yelled, "Doc, stay where you're at!"

Doc's laugh, mad and without restraint, floated to him, and distance had turned it thin. "Don't try to stop me!"

Frank whirled his horse, put spurs viciously into the animal's ribs. Eb Lowe, coat-tails flying and elbows flapping, was already halfway up the alley, his horse flinging gobs of mud behind.

Frank snapped a shot toward him, holding the gun high. Doc turned in his saddle, fired twice. One of the bullets tugged at Frank's sleeve, tore his shirt and brought blood, warm and wet, to his upper arm. The other went wide.

Out on Main, ignoring the rain, stood half a hundred men, grouped before the Blanco. Against its wall slouched Sam Podall, his face watchful and inscrutable. Utah Benson harangued the group from the boardwalk in front of the saloon.

Eb Lowe, forced onto Main by the curving of the alley, burst out before them almost at the instant they turned their heads to search out the source of the shots. They saw Frank pounding along behind Doc, and they saw the column of smoke that the fire at Doc's house had made.

AROUSED already, and sensing that something was wrong, they spread out, forming a solid wall of men in the street. Eb Lowe was faced with the choice of turning back toward Frank, or of riding them down. He chose the latter course. He thundered heedlessly at them and they broke and moved aside. Doc's horse plunged through. As he cleared the group on the other side, a volley of shots rang out. His horse hesitated an instant, faltered, and end-over-ended with a sodden crash in the mud of the street, sliding a full fifteen feet on his back before he stopped and lay thrashing and leg-broken.

Doc, flung clear as the horse somersaulted, sailed through the air like a limp and ragged scarecrow doll to land on all fours not ten feet from the house. Dazed he was, but not out. When he stood up, he had a man on either side, holding roughly to his elbows.

Frank rode up and swung to the ground. Utah Benson's voice was rough and full of violence. "What's he done, Frank?" It was a measure of the respect these men held for Frank, this assumption that if Frank was chasing a man, the man had done something wrong.

Frank said, "Turn him loose. He can't go anywhere."

Doc Lowe stood sullen and gasping for the wind that had been pounded out of him by the fall.

Frank said, "Boys, Doc hasn't got any vaccine. Somebody smashed all his bottles this morning. Doc set fire to his shack an' was lighting out when I rode up." Suddenly then the thing that had puzzled him and troubled him yesterday was clear in his mind. With eyes narrowed, he asked, "Doc, how come you had enough vaccine to take care of an epidemic, anyway? There's never been a case of anthrax in this country since the whites took it away from the Utes."

Fright and panic and guilt traced their patterns on Eb Lowe's face. Utah Benson howled, "Why hang him, he started the thing!"

"Maybe not. Let him talk." But there was no conviction in Frank. Slow anger burned in him. The murmur of the crowd was an ugly thing, like the throat-growl of a wolf that rumbles in the animal's belly before it rises and become a full-fledged snarl.

Utah Benson, his face twisted, cuffed Eb Lowe on the ear and sent him staggering. He growled, "Talk, or I'll break your arm!"

"All right! I will! Damn you all anyway! Sure I started it. I started it an' I was goin' to stop it, but now I can't. It'll wipe you out!" His voice was rising, half mad. "I hope it does. I hope it kills every beef critter in the country, an' you with them, Benson. You especially."

His admission held them spellbound for a short moment. Then, as the awfulness of his crime penetrated their consciousness, the murmur swelled and became a roar. Moving with the singleness of purpose of one man, the crowd circled him, overwhelmed him and dragged him bodily toward the edge of town.

In '85 they had hanged a horsethief, and in '87 a killer. Now they hustled Ed Lowe toward the same tree.

They left Frank Shasta standing alone before the Blanco, save for Sam Podall. Sam murmured, clutching Frank's bloody sleeve, "Let them alone, Frank. Don't be a fool."

BUT IN Frank Shasta the feeling of responsibility was strong, for it was he who had uncovered Eb Lowe's crime, and so had brought about this violence. He yanked away form Sam, mounted the black and spurred the animal recklessly through the mud.

He overtook the mob halfway to the aged cottonwood, and crowded through them with little concern for those who might stand in his way. He yelled, "Hold it, Benson! Leave Lowe for the sheriff. You want to hang too for leading a lynch mob?"

Hands clutched for Frank, but he kicked them away. He was seeing now, for the first time, that these were not the neighbors he knew. Blood-lust had put an unrestrained violence in them that would brook no interference.

More hands clawed at him and at last dragged him from his saddle by their very numbers. Viciously he lashed out with his fists, feeling the solid flesh and bone beneath them and feeling savage satisfaction as he saw the blood his fists drew.

Then a rifle stock smashed against the base of his skull, and he dropped to the ground. They left him there, sprawled in the thin mud, but before they went on, they took the rope from his saddle and looped it about Eb Lowe's neck.

Nell Briscoe, even at this distance, could recognize the shape of Frank Shasta on the ground. Running, filled with terror, and the fear that guilt could bring, she left her second story vantage point and came down the stairs and out into the street.

Rain put a silver mist in her light hair as she ran down the street clutching her skirts, holding them high out of the mud.

Behind her, Ron Briscoe's gruff voice called ineffectively, "Nell!

Stay here! That's no place for a woman out there!"

Nell did not even hear. Her thoughts were reaping the reward of what she had done this morning, early, while most of the town was yet asleep or riding with Frank Shasta toward Hocking's ranch. Nell had been jubilant over Frank's break with Rose and her father a month past. Yet try as she would, with her softness and her willingness, she had been unable to take Frank Shasta's thoughts altogether away from Rose Hocking.

Today then, early, she had conceived the plan of destroying Eb Lowe's vaccine, with the thought in her mind that without the vaccine an amicable solution to the difference between Frank Shasta and Hocking would be most unlikely. With Frank forced to fight Hocking wholeheartedly, he knew the chance of a reconciliation between he and Rose would become an impossibility.

Almost, last night, had she achieved her purpose with Frank, setting the snare of her physical charms and knowing that if he succumbed he would be too honorable to do else but marry her. Failing in this because of Benson's interruption, and chagrined over it, she had been perhaps too hasty this morning. Now her action was about to cost the life of Doc Lowe.

Flames rose from Eb Lowe's shack, from the corral, and shed to which it had spread. As the roof fell in, a shower of blazing sparks rose on the hot blast of air from the fire, scattering over Ute Falls' shacktown.

Nell, past the body of Frank Shasta on the ground, past his strangely staggering mount, screamed at the mob. "Are you going to let the town burn while you hang a man?" Her voice was lost in their vengeful determination, in their hoarse shouting. She tore and clawed her way through their solid ranks and at last some semblance of sanity came to them seeing a woman here.

She screamed, "Stop this! If you must hang someone, then hang me! I was the one that broke Eb Lowe's bottles of vaccine. If it were not for me, he would be able to stop the epidemic!"

They wavered, and fell back from her, staring at her as though she were mad. Ron Briscoe came through the crowd and caught her arm. "Are ye daft, girl? What are ye talkin' about?"

An odd stillness gripped the mob, broken only by the sobbing, rasping fight for breath as Eb Lowe clawed at the tightened loop of lariat rope about his neck. Into this silence broke the raucous and frantic pealing of the schoolhouse bell, and while it was yet ringing the cry, "Fire! Fire!" broke from a dozen throats.

On the frontier no man ignores this cry. All thought of Eb Lowe was gone, and the cowmen raced for the river, gathering buckets as they went, to form a line between river and the blaze.

Nell Briscoe, pale and trembling, made her slow way back to where Frank Shasta was stirring painfully. As she knelt beside him she thought, "He will hate me when he finds what I have done. Oh, why did I do it? Why did I do it?"

CHAPTER VI

LOADED FOR BEAR

A THOUSAND hammers pounded inside Frank Shasta's skull, and it seemed as though any second his head would burst, scattering its pieces over all this street.

The softness and sympathy of Nell Briscoe was the first thing to penetrate his consciousness. The second was Eb Lowe nearby, rubbing resentfully at the red welt the rope had made on his neck. Frank sat up. He said ruefully, "I didn't stop them, but something did. What was it?"

"Her." Eb jerked his head to indi-

cate Nell. "She's the one that broke the vaccine bottles."

This was puzzling to Frank, but more puzzling suddenly were the antics of his horse. Like a man lost in the dizziness of alcohol, the animal staggered up the street, weaving from one side of it to the other. In front of the Blanco, the black collapsed, the shock of his falling communicating itself through the ground clear to where Frank sat. Eb was running toward the big gelding, and Frank stood up, swaying momentarily like a tall pine in a gale. The street blurred before his eyes and dizziness nearly overwhelmed him. Rubbing the back of his head carefully, he walked toward the horse and the man bending over it. Eb straightened as he approached, a nameless, awful dread in his deepset eyes. He fixed his glance on Nell Briscoe, his blame and his hate scorching her.

He said in a voice wholly without life, "Anthrax. Look at the lump on his neck. How'd he git it there?"

Frank, confused and without the full use of his wits, stared uncomprehendingly. As though he hated this new thought, as though he would not yet believe it, Eb Lowe croaked, "Your rope. You dragged Hocking's cow out of Canyon Creek with it. Later you roped this horse with it, didn't you?" Giving Frank no time to answer, he screamed, "Didn't you?"

Frank nodded, his eyes staring at the welt on Eb Lowe's neck. Suddenly Nell Briscoe began to laugh. Her laugh pealed hysterically down the length of the empty street. Eb Lowe stepped close and hit her in the mouth with his fist. She stopped laughing and began to cry. Anger stirred in Frank, but died abruptly as Lowe choked, "I'm next. Damn you, I'm next! They used your rope on me. It was so tight it broke the skin. And there's no vaccine left! There's no vaccine left!"

As though he could flee from this dread disease, he turned and began to run, a scarecrow of a man, coat flapping in the chill wind. At the edge of town, he tripped and fell. Up again, he ran until he went out of sight into the thick-growing willows at the river's edge. Nell covered her face with her hands, her body shaking silently. Then she too ran, toward home, without looking at Frank, without looking back.

Behind him, Frank heard the dry voice of Sam Podall, "Come inside, son. More than anything else right now, you need a drink."

All through the long afternoon the men of the town and the Canyon Creek ranchers fought the blaze that threatened to engulf both Ute Falls' shacktown, and the town proper as well. The flames utterly consumed the shack of Eb Lowe, and three which adjoined it. Toward nightfall, with the blaze nearly out, half a dozen men went up town with team and stoneboat, rolled the carcass of Frank Shasta's horse onto the sled and dragged it up onto the high ground to the north of town where they burned it and Frank's rope with it. Then these same men went to the riverbank, stripped down and scrubbed with brushes and strong soap, as though this would ward off any infection they might have caught. Feeling relieved, they dressed then and made their way to the Blanco, to the smoky, lamplighted room filled with the reeking and sweating bodies of the firefighters.

UTAH BENSON, broad and smoke-blackened, stood with bottle in hand and back to the bar. He shouted, "Well now boys, it's fish or cut bait. You seen what Frank's rope done. It killed his horse, an' probably killed Doc. If Hocking won't do nothing, if he ain't goin' to help us stamp out the thing, then we'd better get ready to fight, or give up an' move out of the country."

Sam Podall said, "You got to have more plan than jist fightin'. You boil up there onto Hocking's layout, an' there'll be a few of you won't come back."

Utah looked around him, slyness creeping into his heavy face. Sam said, "If you're lookin' for Frank, he ain't here. He went over to the hotel to sleep off the lump you put on his head."

Utah said, "Hocking won't be lookin' fer trouble at two-three o'clock in the morning, will he? If we was to start now, that's about the time we'd git there."

He heard the low murmur of approval that rose from the packed room. And a new idea was born in his mind. A man, if he was to get big in a settled country like this one, had to see opportunities and seize them as they arose. This was Utah Benson's opportunity. Supposing Hocking were killed in the raid? Suppose further that the action he and the others were to take afterward were successful in stamping out the anthrax outbreak? Would not the gratitude of these men toward him for his decisive action be sufficient to hold them back if he were to grab Hocking's vast and unpatented range?

Utah thought it would. He shouted, "Well, come on then! What the hell are we waitin' for?"

As the group left Ute Falls, thin and drifting wisps of cloud exposed the full moon momentarily. There was a chill to the air, but the rain had stopped entirely. Thirty strong was this group of raiders, peaceful men turned violent by the threat to their security.

They thundered across the bridge that spanned Blue River and took the long-rising road that wound along the bank of Canyon Creek. Moonlight glinted on the blued steel of their weapons. Their faces held a grimness, and if there was indecision or doubt in any of them, it was carefully hidden.

But in more than one of them was the wondering thought as they gazed at Utah's solid shape at the head of the column, "What in the merry devil does he intend to do, *murder them in their beds?*"

SAM PODALL, only slightly unsteady from his evening's drinking, watched them go, standing in the lamplight that shone through the dirty windows of the Blanco and laid its soft glow on the street.

The unaccustomed chill of the air put a trembling in his knees and in his jaw and made his teeth chatter slightly, reminding him of his oft-repeated but never kept promise to himself that he would spend no more winters in this high and bleak country.

Jake Halldorson, tall, bony and craggy of face, came out of the doors to stand beside him. The oldster, swaying from the effects of tonight's score of free drinks, peered nearsightedly into the night and muttered thickly, "Hell to pay tonight."

Sam only grunted, "Go home, Jake." Sam was fighting a battle within himself. Drink had dimmed its urgency, but as the cold air wore away the effects of the alcohol, it became more pressing and more disturbing.

Jake fished in his capacious coat pocket and took out a battered and curve-stemmed pipe. He tamped it full of rough cut tobacco and thrust it into his mouth. Sam, watching him, murmured, "How in the devil do you hold that in your mouth? If I didn't have no more teeth than you've got, I'm hanged if I wouldn't give up a pipe and smoke cigarettes."

Jake asked, "You goin' to let Frank Shasta sleep up there in the hotel whilst that murderin' bunch jumps on Hocking an' his girl?"

Anger stirred in Sam, perhaps more anger than was justified under the circumstances. "It's none of my blamed business, an' none of yours, either!" His glance roved up Main, saw the single square of light in Ron Briscoe's two-storied house. His thought was, "Nell's still up," and he felt a momentary pity for her. She was a warm and lusty woman and knew what she wanted. He did not blame her because she had been

clumsy in her method of going after it.

Trying as much to justify the doubt in his own mind as to justify himself in Jake's eyes, Sam said, "Frank's took an awful wallop on the head. He's apt to be hasty anyway. If I was to go wake him up, he'd only chase up there an' git hisself kilt. Would that be doin' him a favor?"

Jake shrugged. "Guess not." Stepping carefully, he crossed the street and disappeared into the dark passageway between the bank and the Mercantile store. Sam Podall stood a moment more, then shrugging, turned back into his now empty saloon. As the doors swung to behind him, he heard a step on the walk. He growled, "No more tonight. I'm closin' up," and started to swing shut the heavy inner doors. But the voice from outside stopped him, for it was a woman's voice. "Wait."

He whirled. Nell Briscoe, shawl-wrapped and white-faced, stood on the walk. Fright was in her eyes. She looked as though she were poised for flight. She cried softly, "You've got to wake Frank."

"And let him go up there and get killed?"

She nodded. "If that is the way it has to be."

Sam nodded wearily. "I guess you're right. I've been thinking the same thing myself all evening." He moved into the saloon, blew out the lamps and returned, closing the doors and locking them behind him. He took her elbow and steered her up Main toward home. He said, "I'll wake him and I'll ride with him."

He was smelling the woman fragrance of her, strongly stirred, and suddenly he wished he were not so ugly, wished he were in some business other than the saloon business.

Nell was sobbing softly as he left her at her door. Moving swiftly he went down Main and entered the Elkhorn Hotel. A single lamp burned dimly on the desk, and the bespectacled clerk snored lustily behind it. Stepping softly, Sam went past him and climbed the creaking stairs.

He had no trouble finding Frank's room, for he had helped Frank up here this evening himself. Without knocking, he went in and struck a match. Frank Shasta rose on an elbow sleepily, blinking against the flare of the match.

Sam Podall whispered, "Get your boots on, Frank. Utah Benson and thirty others are headin' for Hocking's, an' they're loaded for bear."

CHAPTER VII

REBELLION

THE AIR cleared up here in the high country much sooner than it did lower down in the valley of the Blue. Rose Hocking stood on the long veranda at sundown, smelling the wet cleanness of the air, the chill fragrance of the spruces that crowded against the back of the big house. Silence lay over the land, except for the drip-drip of rain from the eaves of the house, and except for the small metallic sounds as the crew moved about their last chores preparatory to entering the bunkhouse for supper.

Blue, fragrant cedar smoke drifted from the bunkhouse chimney, rising and to Rose, forecasting a fair day for tomorrow. Boiling coffee and frying beef spread and mingled their homey fragrances with these other, wilder smells.

Glen Hocking came home from his ride, big and blustering in his wool-plaid coat and stiff, batwing chaps, damp and strong with the smell of man and horse. Climbing the porch steps, he caught Rose beneath her arms and tossed her effortlessly into the air, just as he had when she was a tiny girl. She frowned, displeased with him and wondering how she could make him see that he could not ride roughshod over his downcreek neighbors forever without paying for it. Trouble, poorly concealed, rode the creases on Glen Hocking's brow. Rose

asked, "Did you find some more?"

"Two. Hang it, I wonder how the thing got started."

"You should have let the vet vaccinate."

He snorted, but conviction was lacking in him. "We burned the two we found. Mind you, I ain't sayin' Doc was right, but burnin' the carcasses sure won't hurt nothin'."

Rose followed him into the house, her earlier assurance melting oddly before his easy arrogance. Yet there was no lessening of her purpose.

With characteristic unconcern for the cleanliness of the house, he stamped mud from his heavy boots before the fireplace and shucked out of his coat, tossing it carelessly on the floor.

Rose, tiny but stiff with determination, said in a still, soft voice, "I will be leaving here tomorrow. When this is over, if he is alive, Frank will come for me and we will be married. If he is not alive, I will never want to see either you or this country again."

There. It was said. Now she waited for the storm to break.

For a moment she thought he had not heard, for he continued his shrugging and stamping and wheezing, backing himself scorchingly close to the fire as though to soak its welcome warmth clear to his bones. He waited, and he waited, and Rose knew at last that he was digesting her rebellion, was perhaps for the first time in his life thinking out a problem before he began the shouting.

She could not know how much she looked like her mother had looked, standing there, nor that her words of revolt were in very nearly the same tone and voice that her mother had used years before.

Yet she did know this, that no one forced Glen Hocking; for it was ingrained in him that pressure only firmed his stubbornness and stirred his anger.

The small pressure Rose put upon him now had this effect. He said coldly, "If that is the way you want it, then that is the way it will have to be. Do you think that I will crawl or beg or change the things I intend to do because you threaten me?"

"I am not threatening. I have never threatened. But there was threat enough today in Utah Benson and in those with him. It should have made you think. Frightened men are dangerous, Dad. The men with Utah Benson were frightened men. And you have put Frank in the middle. If he sides with them, he must fight you and indirectly, me."

Her voice rose only slightly, but desperation ran through her words. "I won't put him in that position, Dad. I won't have him feeling that he is betraying me by doing what he thinks is right. And I won't run the risk of having him fight his neighbors because he will not fight you."

Glen Hocking sat down heavily. His voice was coarse and hating. He growled, "Get out of my sight!"

Rose hesitated, remorseful and feeling tears forming behind her eyes. If she could only explain—make him see—soften him.

He turned his face full toward her, eyes blazing and mouth a bitter, thin line. He shouted, "Damn it, get out of my sight! Can't you hear?"

Rose turned and went out, down the long, dim hallway to her own room. Frustration and anger were strong in her, but there was something else, something that made the flood of tears come, made her body shake with sobs. It was pity. Pity for Glen because he could not change, because his own way and his own stubbornness were more important to him than even his own flesh and blood.

Into her valise she packed the clothes she wanted to take, and then she stretched herself out on the bed, appalled at the irrevocability of the step she had taken, but full of relief because she would no longer be forced into conflict with either Frank or with Glen Hocking, both of whom she loved.

Once, at midnight, she wakened from a nightmare of vague and obscure terror, but hearing nothing, she

forced relaxation into her body and did not wake again until Utah Benson rode howling into the yard....

BUCKLING his gunbelt as he ran, Frank Shasta took the hotel steps two at a time, and half a dozen steps behind him ran Sam Podall.

As he passed the desk, the clerk roused with a start, but he had no time to speak before Frank and Sam burst through the door and were gone. Down the silent and deserted street toward the long livery barn ran the two, with Sam yelling breathlessly behind, "I got a couple of pretty good horses in the livery barn."

Frank muttered under his breath, "They'll have to be good." Aloud he asked, "How much start has Utah got?"

"An hour. No more than that. He said somethin' about gittin' to Hocking's about three-four o'clock in the morning. So he's allowing plenty of time an' keepin' his horses fresh."

A precious ten minutes were lost in locating Sam's horses in the pitch-black of the stable, saddling and leading them outside. Then, sparing neither spur nor quirt, Frank galloped across the bridge and took the winding road up Canyon Creek.

His horse was a big, dappled gray, black of mane and tail, whose eagerness and willingness to run bespoke the heavy ration of grain to which he was accustomed. But Frank pulled him back into a fast, mile-eating trot, for he knew that a fat and grain-fed horse will tire fast and sweat easily.

Ranging up beside him, Sam asked, "What you goin' to do, Frank? There's thirty men with Utah."

"Hell, I don't know. Get there first of all. After that..." It was difficult for him to hold the horse in, yet he knew that if he did not the animal would play out on him.

The moon settled toward the horizon, and the air turned colder with the clearing skies and the approach of dawn.

At one-thirty, they passed through Frank's place, and at two came onto Hocking's vast domain. Oddly enough, the disturbing thing in Frank Shasta's mind was not the thirty men with Utah Benson, but Benson himself. Nor did he worry now about which side of this fight he must take. That had been decided for him. This raid before dawn had robbed the small ranchers of whatever right might have been on their side. What they planned, what Benson planned and what they backed him up in, was murder and destruction, not the honest fight of men crowded against a wall.

Sam Podall, as though sensing his thoughts, said, "The way to beat any opposition is to remove the guy in the driver's seat. If you're with the mob, get Hocking. If you're with Hocking, get Benson."

Frank's tone was bitter. "How you going to do that in a pitch black yard with thirty or forty men milling around and all of them shooting?" He thought for a moment, saying finally, "Benson's after something. He's never stood at the head of anything before. Why is he doing it now?"

"What is any man after in a country where there's more cattle than there is grass, where there's more men than there is land? Hocking holds his grass by force. If Hocking was to git killed tonight, who could hold his grass for him?"

Half a mile from Hocking's house, Frank heard the distant popping of the guns, and now he sank spurs into the gray's ribs, forcing him forward, forcing from him every last ounce of power that was left.

CHAPTER VIII

"SMOKE 'EM OUT!"

ROSE LEAPED from her bed as the noise of shots racketed across the yard, entering the closed windows of the house. Yells volleyed back and forth between bunkhouse and house, and bullets made a solid, deadened sound as they imbedded themselves in the log walls.

Snatching a woolen robe, she sped barefooted down the hall, bursting into the big front room immediately behind the bull-roaring bulk of her father. Alone these two were in the big house, for Glen Hocking would tolerate not even the cook sleeping in the house. Hastily Rose ran to the door and dropped the heavy oak bar into place. Speeding to the rear door, she did the same there. Glass, shattered by bullets, made a continuing, tinkling sound.

Hocking roared as she retured, "This is the work of that jigger you want to marry! You still want to go with him?"

"Frank would have no part in this." She was staunch and whitefaced. Now she could hear, from the direction of the bunkhouse, the volley of answering shots that the crew poured into the milling shapes in the yard. Crowded recklessly against a broken window, she heard a harsh yell of pain, saw a man go tumbling to the ground, only a dim shape in the air as he fell, only a shapeless lump on the ground afterward.

Utah Benson's harsh shout was solid and tangible enough in the unearthly tangle of milling horses and running men, "Take cover, damn you! We got all night to smoke 'em out!"

Glen Hocking thrust Rose aside with a rough and peremptory hand, then flung a shot from his six-shooter at the sound of the voice. An answering burst beat out the remaining glass from the rock of the fireplace.

Rose called, panic touching her, "Dad, are you hurt?"

His voice was a growl of rage beneath the window sill. "Nicked."

Utah Benson's harsh yell rolled across the yard again, this time directed at Glen Hocking within the house, "Come out with your hands up. You're out of business, because we're goin' to kill every rotten cow in your herd. But there's time to save your life if you come out now."

For answer, Hocking emptied his Colts into the blurring and melting shapes in the yard, scoring at least one hit on a horse, for the animal screamed and went down kicking.

Silence lay heavy and menacing now, broken only by the small sounds of movement, but by no shots. There was the murmur of voices in the timber behind the house, and then suddenly the ring of axes. Benson's words, "..smoke 'em out," suddenly started running through Rose's head, repetitiously. She cried, "Oh Dad, they're going to set fire to the house! Why? Why? You've done nothing to deserve this! You were stubborn and you were wrong, but people don't burn a man's house for being stubborn and wrong!"

He said, "You were leaving. Now is the time to do it. Open the door and sing out who you are. Even those stinking rats out there wouldn't shoot a woman." There was no condemnation in his tone, only the gall-bitter hate of an arrogant man brought to earth, and it was directed at the men outside, not at Rose.

"You know I won't leave you now." She murmured this almost absently, wondering all the while, *Where is Frank? Oh, where is Frank? Why doesn't he come?* It did not occur to her at all that Frank could be there in the yard. She knew he was incapable of joining such a thing as this. She knew, too, that he was incapable of of stopping it. This action tonight was like the thunderous flood that could roar down Canyon Creek after a cloudburst, destroying every living thing in its path and never halting until its fury and violence were spent.

Tiny and pale, she listened to the grunting sounds of the straining men as they dragged dead logs from the timber and piled them against the house. Glen Hocking, raging helplessly, ran from window to window, firing at sounds, at imagined movements, but hitting nothing. Now, all firing had ceased at the bunkhouse, for to fire at the raiders meant firing at the house.

Hope was gone from Rose entirely as she waited for the flames to mount, for the intense heat that would inevit-

ably drive both her and her father into the open.

THE FIRST tiny flames were licking upward as Frank Shasta and Sam thundered around a bend in the road and into the huge clearing where Hocking's sprawling ranch buildings clustered. Frank's head throbbed mercilessly, and the scene before him was blurred and swimming wildly before his eyes. His first reaction was a terrible and overpowering rage, but the steady hand of Sam on his sleeve had its quieting effect, as did Sam's cautious, "Easy now, Frank. You can't whip the whole bunch of them by yourself."

Deviousness had never been one of Frank's characteristics. His was the direct way, which in part perhaps, explained his failure to get along with Glen Hocking. He said, "I can sure as hell try."

"There's a better way. Hocking's got eight or ten men in the bunkhouse that'd take a hand in the fight if they could git out."

Frank heard the ring of axes in the timber behind the house, heard Benson's voice, cursing, directing this work. Leaving their horses, Frank and Sam skirted through the brush at the edge of the yard in front of the house and perhaps three hundred yards from it.

Flames from the coal-oil soaked wood piled against the house suddenly shot into the air, putting a weird and orange glow over all the yard, and throwing into sharp relief against the dark sky the sprawling ranch house.

For a few short moments, guns spat from the bunkhouse at the scurrying figures of the raiders, and three distinct shots came from one front window of the house. Frank grunted, "Look at 'em hunt their holes!" He would not voice the cold fear that clamped its tight fingers across his chest, the fear that Rose, somewhere in that house, lay bleeding or dying. He could see now, in the light from the fire, that not a window had been spared, and he could see the ragged holes in the massive door where bullets sprayed it.

The compulsion, hardly controllable, was on him to run, firing and cursing and raging, directly across the yard toward the concealed and sniping raiders. Yet even Frank's agitated and maddened mind could recognize that this would be sheer suicide.

His movements as these thoughts went through him, had become less careful, more hurried. Sam Podall's hand clutched him again from behind, and Sam's dry voice cautioned, "I ain't quite ready to cash my chips yet, boy. Take it easy. It'll be half an hour before them in the house is forced out by the fire."

Frank slowed, and his steps fell on the damp carpet of pine needles and soggy leaves soundlessly. He stayed back in the timber far enough so that when he did sight one of the guards which Benson must have left over the bunkhouse, the guard and not Frank, would be silhouetted against the light.

Abruptly he stopped. Before him and to his right, not ten yards away, stood a man, alert and gun-ready, but directing his attention toward the bunkhouse and expecting no danger from behind.

He whispered at Sam, "Go on a ways. There may be another." Without waiting to see if Sam would comply, he catfooted closer behind the guard. He knew the man. This guard was Cy Robertson, who had a small spread close to Ute Falls, a wife turning plump, and four little kids, stair-stepping in age from a year to five

Tonight, Frank knew that Cy Robertson would kill him if he turned as quickly as he would cut a snake in two with an irrigating shovel. Yet essentially this man was still the same. This fear and this violence had simply unleashed things in him which might not, under other conditions, ever have showed themselves at all.

HALF A dozen yards behind the man, Frank's foot encountered

a dead branch. It scratched his boot and then snapped. Wasting no motion now, Frank dove in, running and half bent over. He hit Robertson low on the hips as the man turned.

A sharp cry of surprise broke from Cy, and his hands flung out to break his fall. Sprawling over him, Frank saw the gun clutched in his hand and scrabbled ahead, clawing at it. Cy rolled, bringing up his knees instinctively and throwing the strength of his leg muscles against the weight of Frank's body. But he also brought his gun hand forward, as though to strike Frank's head with the gun.

Frank stopped that gunhand, and as Cy's knees straightened, wrenched the gun from the unready muscles of his adversary's hand. This done, when his momentum halted, he came diving back again and this time the gunbarrel rapped hard against Cy's skull.

Frank got up, wary and nervous, crouching just a little as he waited for the rush to come against him. Over to his left he heard sounds of a scuffle, and knew that Sam had come to grips with the other guard.

He owed Sam a hand, but he owed something to Rose, too, even to Glen Hocking. Bending as he ran, he went swiftly across the lighted clearing between timber and bunkhouse, coming up, surprisingly on the dark side of it without drawing fire from the ranchers holed up in the brush beside the burning house.

A window was here on the dark side of the bunkhouse, broken out now, and Frank paused beside it. He called, "Sam and I took care of the guards. Come on out this window, and we'll show Benson some opposition."

"Like hell! You'll slug us one at a time as we come through."

Frank moved in front of the window, where he was silhouetted against the orange glow cast on the fringing timber by the burning house. He said, "I'll come in. If a man of you gets hurt goin' out, you can do what you want with me."

Grabbing the window frame on one side with both hands, he yanked it clear, then tossed both his gun and Cy's through the window. He heard them land on the puncheon floor, but by then he was head and shoulders through the window. Hard hands pushed at him, forcing him back out and then the crew came through the window one at a time, eight in all. The last handed Frank his guns, saying, "All right. But what do we do now?"

"Circle around through the timber. Give yourselves time to get set, then holler an' shoot fast. I'm going after Benson. If I can get him before you open up, we'll have them licked, because they won't fight without Benson, and they'll think you're a bunch from town."

He watched them scurry, one by one, into the timber, and when the last had gone, ran himself, from scant cover to scant cover, working gradually across the yard toward the now furiously flaming house.

CHAPTER IX

FIRST HARD STEP

A LIGHT breeze eddied upcreek, caught a billowing cloud of smoke and rolled it over Frank Shasta like a blanket. And not a second too soon for Glen Hocking, shouting triumphantly, "There he is! There's your boy that wouldn't have a part of this!"—poured bullets from his six-gun at the running form in the yard.

Frank felt one of them snatch the hat from his head, and bareheaded, dived for the ground. The smoke covered him then and he rose, trying to move with its thickest eddies, moving fast and reaching the brush cover where the raiders hid short seconds later.

In his hand was his Colt's, hammer thumbed back, ready to return the raiders' fire and to make the price for killing himself high. But oddly, these men welcomed him with hoarse shouts, and the fleeting thought crossed his mind, "Glen did me a favor, shooting

at me. He did himself a favor too, because now I can get to Benson."

Returning the gun to its holster, he yelled, "Where's Benson?" received mostly shrugs for answer, but one of the men, crawling up through the low cover of brush tossed his head, saying, "Back there. Just left him." There was an odd exhilaration in all these men, and a wild mob-savagery. Disdaining to crawl, Frank walked in the direction the crawling man had indicated, and came shortly to a group sheltered behind a high clump of oakbrush. Utah Benson, leg-spraddled, stood in the center of this group, issuing orders like a general. One by one, the men with him crawled away to carry out his orders, and at last he was alone, triumphant looking and flushed with success. Frank stepped from the cover of the oakbrush.

He said, "Give it up, Benson, if you want to live. There's a posse from town in the timber behind you right now."

Benson whirled, squat and muscular, his broad face shining with sweat. Wildness flared in his eyes, and smoothly, with his turning, his hand shot downward toward the gun thrust into his belt.

Frank watched him with fascination, and a feeling of unreality near overwhelmed him. His own gun was holstered, and abruptly the thought crossed his mind, "I don't even know whether it's loaded."

Trying to remember how many times he had fired, he shot a hand toward its grips, felt the smoothness of the walnut and the weight of the gun as it came up. He was slow. With Frank, a gun was a seldom used tool.

But Benson's gun cylinder caught for an instant on his belt buckle. Twisting, throwing himself aside, he fired the instant the muzzle of the gun cleared his belt. Frank felt the searing burn of the bullet in his thigh, felt himself falling. Then his own gun muzzle belched flame, and Utah halted, poised an instant in this twisted position with surprise staining his thick features.

The gun dangled from his nerveless fingers and then dropped to the ground. The hand that had held the gun clutched at the spreading stain on his shirtfront. He grunted between clenched teeth, "Damn you..." and then life was gone from him. With a solid crash he fell, not slumping and collapsing, but body-straight, in the direction he had tried to throw himself.

Frank, on the ground, with no control over his injured leg, heard the coming of the raiders and knew when they found Benson dead they would murder him where he lay.

Suddenly from the timber fringe to northward, came the rapid fire of Hocking's crew, their shouting, and Frank grinned faintly. They were doing this up right, and even to Frank, who knew better, this racket sounded like it could not have been made by less than a half a hundred men.

A raider bellowed, "Benson!" and came crashing through the tangle of oakbrush. Frank lay utterly still, watching. The man stumbled over the body of Utah Benson, fell clumsily, then rose and turned to stoop and look at Benson closely. There was panic in his widened eyes as he rose. He turned running, bellowing as he ran, "Benson's dead! Where's the horses?"

The Hocking crew, moving in through the timber, kept up their barrage of lead, their lusty and bloodthirsty shouting. Frank got to his feet, bracing himself against a thick and twisted branch of oakbrush. Pain came now into his leg, and from the thigh down it was soaked and bright red.

Pete Worden, Hocking's foreman, found him there, swaying and pale as he and the rest of the crew advanced toward the house. He paused for only an instant, saying, "Hold on, Frank. I'll be back in a minute. We've got them runnin', but the boss an' Rose are still in the house."

UNNOTICED by either the fleeting raiders or the Hocking crew, a lone and staggering figure detached

(*please turn to page* 117)

MULE DEAL

CHAPTER I

TOWN BUM

A MAN CAN always find excuses for his own weaknesses, and I got around to blaming my interest in whiskey on the yellow-jack. I'd picked up the malaria, along with a bullet, in the stinking jungles of Cuba where I'd been soldiering against the Spaniards.

The spells kept coming back: fever and chills, sick stomach and headaches. When one hit me, I lived on quinine and liquor. Once it was over, I kept dosing myself with rotgut in the false hope of staving off the next attack.

There was more to it than that, to be truthful. While I was away fighting a war, my world at home smashed. My old man, Ben Naylor, passed away. That hurt, because we'd been close—closer than most fathers and sons. My ma had died when I was

★ ★ **COULD DAN NAYLOR HANDLE GUNS**

SUSPENSE - PACKED BOOK - LENGTH NOVEL

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

Thirty thousand head, the Major wanted, and there was money to be made shipping mules to the Boer War. But would Dan Naylor also have to sell his soul to a dangerous woman, and his gun to the highest bidder?

only four, and Pa had never taken up with another woman. He'd been father and mother to me—and schoolteacher too, because for years we never stayed in one place for more than a few weeks. When we finally did settle down, here in Arizona Territory, I was grown up and Pa and I were partners. Naylor & Son, Dealers in Livestock. We owned a livery stable in San Alejandro and a horse ranch down on Sarbo Creek, with me holding down the ranch.... But there was still more to it.

AND WOMEN LIKE HE DID BROOMTAILS? ★ ★

The girl I was engaged to married somebody else while I was in the Army, and that hurt as much as Pa's death. More, maybe.

Anyway, between the yellow-jack and being lonely I got to drinking.

I was a little under the weather the day the letter came.

Jess Whittaker had the Star Route mail contract out Sarbo Creek way, and he brought the letter. I was sprawled out in the shade of the big cottonwood tree in the ranchyard when he called to me, but I didn't bother to get up or even answer. Luis Morales came from the breaking corral where he'd been working with a bronc, to accept the letter. He brought it to me as Whittaker drove off in his buckboard.

I wasn't interested, but I said, "Who's it from, Luis?"

Luis was the only hired hand I had any more. He shrugged, and said, "I cannot read, Danny." He laid the letter beside me and went back to the corral.

I picked it up, after a while, and saw that it was from Phil Amberton and postmarked Bliss, Oklahoma. I got a little interested.

Phil Amberton had been my major during the war. More than that, he'd saved my life. We'd been ambushed in a sugar cane field, and the Spaniards had us outnumbered about five to one. I got a slug in my left leg, and was left behind when my outfit pulled back out of the cane. I figured my number was up, and I lay there thinking of Pa and Louise—and pitying myself. Then, after dark, somebody came crawling out to get me. It was Major Amberton.

If I'd heard that Amberton saved a man while under fire, I wouldn't have believed it. He was the most hated officer I ever came up against. He was no West Pointer, but he sure was what they call a martinet. A lot of the enlisted men had claimed it was Amberton who dreamed up the rules and regulations and wrote the Articles of War. There was talk too that he had pull in the right places in Washington. Anyway, he'd wrangled a commission and he'd made life miserable for a lot of better men than himself.... But he'd saved my life, at risk of his own.

I'd been taken to a field hospital where my leg was patched up and it was discovered that I had malaria. I'd been sent back to the States, to a hospital in Maryland. Finally I'd been mustered out, and I'd come home. I'd never expected to see Amberton again, or even hear from him. Then, some time after the war was over, I got a telegram from him. He'd known that I was from Arizona, of course, and that I was in the horse and mule business, and that's why he sent the wire. He'd wanted to know if I could ship him some mules.

Well, I'd sobered up and rustled around and bought a hundred jugheads and shipped them. They'd cost me fifteen dollars a head, and I'd got back a bank draft for three thousand dollars. Amberton had paid me thirty dollars a head, and I'd made a profit of one hundred per cent. My pa would have loved that.

Amberton wrote a letter with the bank draft, and it said I should keep on shipping mules—all I could buy up, so long as they were sound of limb and wind. It seemed loco to me. Too, I'd been fighting another bout with my malaria. So I hadn't bothered. I was so far gone along the rotgut trail that I cared little about making money.

I didn't know what sort of a game Amberton was playing. Buying up mules just didn't make sense. And I was slow about opening this second letter from him, figuring it was just another demand that I ship more broomtails. But when I got around to reading it, I got a jolt. It read:

Dear Dan: Mrs. Amberton and I are planning to visit Arizona, and of course I hope to look up some of my old comrades-in-arms. Hope to see you. We'll have a couple drinks and talk about the

good old days, eh? Mrs. A. and I will arrive at San Alejandro on the 12th. With best regards....

I sobered up, fast.

I had no hankering to see the man. I'd never liked him, even though I was alive only because of him. Besides, I was ashamed to have him see me the way I was now. I sat up, thinking that I could make myself scarce. I could be off on a trip somewhere when he reached San Alejandro. Luis could tell him that I'd left before his letter came.... Then I knew that wouldn't do.

My old man hadn't brought me up that way; he'd taught me to stand up and face trouble. And this wasn't real trouble; it was just disagreeable. I couldn't run out on Phil Amberton. He'd saved my life. He'd given me a chance to earn an easy fifteen hundred dollars. He considered me a friend.

I yelled for Luis, and asked, "What's the date, *amigo?*"

He scratched his head. "Danny, all I know is that the month is September."

I had to send him riding after Jess Whittaker to find out the date.

And it was the 11th of September, 1900....

I DROVE into town the next afternoon, behind a pair of fast-stepping grays. It was an hour before train time, and I left my rig and team on the shady side of the station and walked along Taos Street toward the center of San Alejandro.

My resolve had been to stay on the wagon during the Ambertons' visit, except for a few sociable bouts with Phil, because I knew that if I took one nip now, I'd want more—a lot more—and be out when the train arrived. But now my resolve wavered. One quick one, I told myself, wouldn't do any harm.

I managed to pass O'Grady's Saloon, but then, in front of the Territorial, I stopped and wrestled with my conscience. It was a losing fight, and I was turning into the place when she came from Doan's store.

Louise. The girl who'd married the other man.

She saw me at once, since Doan's was next to the Territorial, and a look of embarrassment spread over her face. She stopped, just as I did. It was as though we were paralyzed by the sight of each other. It wasn't the first time I'd seen her since I came home; but it was the first time we came face to face without anybody else being about. She was carrying a basket, and she was wearing a plain gingham dress. She looked like any small-town housewife. But she was still beautiful. To my eyes, anyway. And I was aware of how much I'd wanted her. And of how much I hated her for what she'd done to me.

Somebody had to say something, so Louise said, "Hello, Dan." Her voice was low, and not too steady.

I moved toward her, seeing how her auburn hair gleamed in the sunlight. Seeing too that her figure had filled out, properly mature. I lifted my hat, bowed, said, "How do you do, Mrs. Jarrett." I was mocking her.

She flushed and bit her lower lip. "Don't be like that," she said. "It's not like you to be like this, Dan."

"Maybe I need reforming, eh?"

"It hurts me to see you—well, the way you are."

"You've got one man to take care of Mrs. Jarrett. You don't need another."

She looked angry. She murmured, "Of course it's none of my business."

"How right you are, Mrs. Jarrett," I said.

I said it to her back, for she had turned away and was crossing the street toward the bank.

I was sore, but I was ashamed too. I passed up the Territorial and went instead to Sam Meade's barber shop. I carried my bundle to the back room, to take a bath in the tub there. As I got out of my dirty, shabby clothes, I thought about Louise. She'd seen how one man ended up because of

whiskey— Her old man, Hank Dolan. He had been the town bum.

It griped me to think that she thought I was another Hank Dolan. But no doubt she'd heard talk about me, and then there was the seedy way I looked.... Her old man had been lying unconscious in an arroyo out back of town one night when a flash flood quenched his thirst for good. There had been jokes about his drowning; folks said that Hank had his first taste of water that night.

He left a browbeaten wife and three other children besides Louise. They weren't much worse off after his death. Mrs. Dolan took in washing; Louise worked for Mrs. Macklin, who owned a notions store and did dressmaking, and others, three teen-aged boys, scurried around earning a few pennies at odd jobs. The family lived in one of the grubbiest houses in town.

But Louise had got herself out of that mess. She'd found herself a husband.

Damn it, though, she was wrong— I wasn't any Hank Dolan....

I scrubbed myself with yellow soap, and after my bath I opened my bundle and put on my best clothes. My gray broadcloth suit, my hand-tooled boots, my pearl-gray Stetson, a white shirt, a maroon string tie. I looked at myself in the wall mirror, and then realized that I still needed the shave and haircut. I took off my hat, coat and tie, and went and got in the barber chair.

I didn't look too bad when Meade was done working on me. My face was gaunt, my color bad, my eyes bloodshot. But, considering everything, I don't think I looked too bad. I paid Meade, then glanced at his clock.

It was five minutes to train time.

On the street again, I built and lit a cigarette—with shaky hands I'll admit—and then started for the station. I didn't want to pass any saloons, which were all on that side of the street, because of a fear that I'd be tempted again. So I crossed the street, and that meant I had to pass the Cattlemen's Bank.

They appeared at the door of the bank just as I was passing—Louise and her husband, Steve Jarrett. He said, as soon a he saw me, "Oh, Naylor.... May I have a word with you?"

If he'd taken a shot at me, I wouldn't have been more surprised. He knew that Louise had once been promised to me. He must have known that I hated his guts for having won her away from me. The surprise stopped me in my tracks.

But being dressed up had me on my good behavior, and I said, "Sure, why not?"

I went and faced the pair of them.

CHAPTER II

MATT HARBIN

THE CATTLEMAN'S Bank was the only one in San Alejandro and for a hundred miles around. It was owned by old Jason Wyatt, Steve Jarrett's uncle. Banker Wyatt was a tight-fisted old codger, and no philanthropist even where his nephew was concerned. Jarrett was a mere teller, on a teller's salary. The chances were that he'd be that until the old man cashed in his chips, and Wyatt's kind were long-lived.

Jarrett was a transplanted Easterner, and he looked it. He was always neatly dressed, nicely groomed, and never forgot his manners. He was dark of hair and mustache, stocky, of medium height, and beginning to grow a bit thick about the middle. That made him plenty different from me—blondish, lean, six feet tall, with no manners to speak of. His wife was almost as tall as he was, and she looked a little embarrassed over having the two men in her life facing each other.

"What's on your mind, Steve?" I asked.

"Something quite important," he said, in a proper banker's tone.

"Several weeks ago you left with Mr. Wyatt a draft on an Oklahoma bank. It was for three thousand dollars and you wanted us to put it through for payment. Mr. Wyatt said you were a little afraid that it might not be good. It was signed by a Philip Amberton, I believe."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I'd forgot about it."

"You forgot—about three thousand dollars?"

I shrugged. "Well, it's only money."

Jarrett looked shocked. "Mr. Wyatt wanted me to tell you that the draft was quite in order." He smiled faintly. "It didn't bounce. We've credited your account with the three thousand, Dan."

I nodded unconcernedly, and said, "Sorry, but I'm got to meet the train." The westbound was whistling in the distance. "Thanks for telling me about the three thousand. . ."

I tipped my hat.

And a I turned away I saw Louise looking at me with widened, speculative eyes.

Maybe it was petty-minded of me, but I felt good about it. I'd always had a vindictive nature. If anybody did me dirt, I liked to pay them back—with interest. And I'd hit Louise in a sore spot with my casualness about the three thousand dollars.

Walking to the station, I remembered how she'd written me a letter after I'd come home from the Army and sent it out to the ranch with Luis Morales. In this letter she'd explained why she married Steve Jarrett instead of waiting for me. It had seemed that I would never come back, she'd written. And things had been tough. As she'd put it, life had been unbearable for her. When Steve proposed, she had seen a way to better herself—and at the same time help her mother and brothers.

So she'd married him, the banker's nephew.

Now she lived in a house that wasn't quite so grubby as the Dolan home, but I knew her new life wasn't any bed of roses. Not with her husband drawing down only a teller's salary. I'd known the man whom Steve had replaced; he'd earned sixty-five dollars a month, and I doubted that Steve Jarrett was earning much more. I could have done a lot more for Louise, and now she was beginning to realize it.

Ben Naylor, my old man, hadn't believed in banks. Not in cow country banks, anyway. He'd never kept much of an account at the Cattlemen's Bank, and he'd been a modest, humble man who never bragged. Too, a livery stableman didn't rate high in the business world or on the social ladder. And I guess most folks didn't realize that Naylor & Son's business was mostly trading in horses and mules. But the truth was, Pa and I had done pretty well—and after his death I inherited his share of the business.

I'd sold the livery stable for twenty-eight hundred dollars, and I'd got a couple thousand more for what livestock went with the stable. In the safe out at the Bar-N Ranch, where Pa had kept most of his money, there was about eight thousand dollars more in cash. So the three thousand that Jarrett had told me about wasn't too important to me. The three thousand was for the mules I shipped to Phil Amberton, and I had told Steve Jarrett the truth—I'd forgotten about it.

So now Louise, who'd married for money, knew that she had married the wrong man. And I'd had my little revenge on her.

But all at once I didn't feel good about having impressed her that she should have waited for me. Not only had she not got what she wanted, but I was eating my heart out with loneliness and in danger of becoming a bum.

I felt a little sorry for both of us.

THE WESTBOUND was easing to a stop when I reached the station. Two men and a woman were waiting

to board the train, and old Purd Adams, the station-master, limped past me to exchange pouches with the mail car clerk. The usual loafers, a half dozen of them, held down the benches along the wall of the building. All but one were old men, and that one, Matt Harbin, was just plain lazy.

But Harbin came alive at sight of me. He got to his feet, hitched up his pants, spat tobacco juice, and said, "Danny, you got a minute?"

I saw a porter loaded down with luggage descend from a Pullman, and I figured that the Ambertons wouldn't be far behind him. But Matt Harbin and I had a lot in common; we'd been in the same company during the war, and since we'd turned out to be no-account civilians. Too, Harbin's wife had run off with a hardware drummer while he was in Cuba. I felt that the two of us were sort of kindred spirits. So I said, "Sure, Matt."

"I'm a little short right now, Dan," he said. He always talked with a whine when making a touch, like any panhandler. "Got a job lined up, but I need a little money to tide me over. You know how it is, Danny-boy."

I knew, all right. I'd helped him out a dozen times before. I would give him some money, and he'd head for the nearest saloon. He'd never pay me back. But I dug into my pocket, handed him two silver dollars.

"Thanks, Danny. I'll pay you back next week, sure."

"All right, Matt. I'm in a hurry now."

I moved past him, toward Phil Amberton who was helping a woman descend from the Pullman. If I hadn't known better, because of his letter. I would have sworn that she wasn't his wife but his daughter. She was that young. Later, when I looked into Claire Amberton's eyes, I knew that she might be young in years but otherwise she was as old as—well, as Eve.....

Amberton saw me, and a smile spread across his face. He was an amiable man, when he wanted to be. He was a handsome man too; or rather, since he was a year or two past fifty, he was distinguished looking. He was tall, ramrod straight, lean and fit, and he looked as good in civilian clothes as in uniform. He thrust his hand out to me.

"Dan, you're looking great. It's good to see you again."

I wasn't looking great, but that didn't matter to him. He always saw what he wanted to see; nothing more, nothing less. We shook hands, and anybody would have thought that I'd been an officer too instead of just a buck private.

He took his wife's arm. "Claire, this is Dan Naylor—the man I've talked so much about. Dan, Mrs. Amberton."

He introduced her with pride, like any middle-aged man whose wife was young and attractive. As though he knew other men were envious of his luck. And that was understandable, for she was a lot of woman.

She held out a gloved hand, and said, "How do you do, Dan."

Her voice was low, husky. I took her hand, stammered something that I hoped was the proper thing. Then I looked into her eyes and discovered that she wasn't too young for her husband, or for a man of any age. Her eyes had knowing depths, and all the knowledge in them was of men; and I knew that Phil Amberton hadn't gotten her out of any young ladies' finishing school. She smiled at me, but her smile didn't reflect in her eyes as a smile should. Her eyes remained chill and knowing, and I had the feeling that they knew all about me.

She said, "Yes, Phil has talked so much about you, Dan. Do you mind—" she moved a little closer—"if I call you 'Dan'?"

"I'd be glad," I said. "And welcome to Arizona, Mrs. Amberton."

Her gloved hand caressed mine as it was withdrawn. Or maybe I just imagined that. She thanked me, and

added, "It's always nice to be welcomed to a new place." Her voice seemed caressing, too. "I always like seeing new places. And meeting new people."

Maybe there wasn't as much intimacy in her manner as I thought. At any rate, Amberton showed no signs of disapproval. He was still smiling, on his wife and on me. And he asked, "How far is it to your ranch, Dan?"

"About six miles, Major. I have a rig waiting."

I could see that he liked me calling him "Major." There was a pleased look in his eyes. He turned to tip the porter who had made a neat pile of the luggage.

Then a voice behind me said loudly, "Well, I'll be hanged! It's old Brass-Buttons, himself!" It was Matt Harbin's voice. "Now, ain't that something!"

Amberton swung around, his face turning red. No doubt he'd known that the men serving under him had tagged him with the nickname of Brass-Buttons. He forced a smile, and said, "Well, it's Corporal Harbin." He was trying to smooth it over. "How are you, old man?"

He even offerd his hand to Harbin.

THERE WAS a grin on Matt Harbin's face, and a look of deviltry in his bloodshot eyes. He ignored Amberton's hand. He spat, and tobacco juice splattered Amberton's shoes. "There was a time when I prayed that I'd get a chance to punch you in the eye, Brass-Button," he said. "Now I'm ready to believe that there's something to praying."

"Now, see here," Amberton said. "If You ever had any complaint against me—"

"Me, and more good men than I can name!"

"The war's over, Harbin."

"Yeah. And us both civilians. That makes it just dandy for me," Harbin said. "I ain't doing this for myself alone, Brass-Buttons. But for all the men that ever served under you."

He slapped his right fist against the palm of his left hand. He was taking his time, relishing Amberton's uneasiness.

I was uneasy, too. I glanced at Mrs. Amberton and was surprised at her calm. She looked almost bored. Maybe she figured that her husband could handle Matt Harbin. But he didn't—and neither did I. Lazy and shiftless Harbin might be, but he was also rough and tough. More, he wasn't just a talker. He meant to give Amberton a working-over, for wrongs real or fancied. And I couldn't let it happen. Amberton was my guest.

I moved in, caught Harbin's right arm just as he started a swing. I got a good hold on him, and, because of the power behind the punch, he was thrown off balance. I kept my grip on his arm.

"Like he says, Matt, the war's over."

He whirled to face me, and I saw that I was in for trouble. Harbin was raging because of my interference. And I sensed somehow that there was a festering hatred in the man—directed at Phil Amberton only because Harbin could identify him as an authority or a power or what-have-you that once made life miserable for him. He hated the whole world, Matt Harbin did, and maybe with reason. He'd been a steady enough person before the war, then his wife ran out on him and the hurt and loss of that caused him to doubt his own manhood. He'd lost everything important because of going into the Army, and to him, at the moment, Amberton represented the Army. And so he hated Amberton, just as he hated the man who'd stolen his wife. And he hated me because I'd interfered.... He was powerful in his rage. He broke loose of me, drove a blow to the side of my face that staggered me.

He cursed me, and hit me in the stomach.

I grappled with him, saying, "Matt, for Lord's sake—"

He swung me around, threw me against the wall of the station.

The train was pulling out with a train's usual racket, but the roaring in my ears was something else. Some of it was the shock from Harbin's punches, but some of it was anger. I shoved away from the wall just in time to keep him from booting me. I got in my first blow, hard to his bristly chin. His head rocked back. But he recovered and rushed, and I had to sidestep in a hurry to keep him from getting me in a bear-hug.

He kept lunging at me, muttering oaths. I jabbed him a couple of times to the face, but he came on and sent me reeling with a punch to the jaw. He made a mistake then; instead of grabbing me with his powerful arms, he swung at my jaw again. I was lighter on my feet, faster, and I ducked. Missing the blow, Harbin was off balance for an instant. And I hit him square on the chin with all my might.

He slammed against the wall this time, and hung there for a moment and then slid down it and sat down all loose-jointed. He was dazed, and after a moment of trying to rise, he just stared at me with his eyes full of hate.

"All right, Dan," he said huskily. "It's that way with you. So all right."

"Matt, the Major is here as my guest," I said. "What else could I do? Don't make a grudge of this."

He didn't say anything, but dug into his pocket and brought out the two silver dollars I'd given him. He threw them at my feet. He still didn't say anything, but sat there and gazed at me with contempt until I turned away.

I said, "Sorry, Major," and Amberton nodded. I had the feeling that he was glad that I'd taken Harbin on for him. "Let's get started," I added, and turned to the pile of luggage.

Claire Amberton was staring at me. She no longer looked bored. Her eyes gleamed, her cheeks were flushed, and her breast rose and fell with her hurried breathing. The brawl had excited her. She was watching me as though I was a freak, or had done something wonderful. For some reason, knowing that about her—that she enjoyed seeing men fight—shocked me. That was when I realized what Amberton's wife might be a dangerous woman....

CHAPTER III

THE DANGEROUS WOMAN

I PICKED up a valise and a leather hat-box, and Amberton took the two remaining traveling bags. The woman walked beside me along the platform, close beside me. And I was so conscious of her that I forgot Matt Harbin and the shame his contempt had made me feel. I stole a look at her.

She was tall, rather slender, with honey-blonde hair and a cameo-perfect profile. Her lips were full, sensuous; and when she smiled—which was seldom, I was to learn—her mouth was pleasant enough, but mostly it had a sullen look. She was fashionable dressed in dark-green, and if a man didn't look close, there was a suggestion of fragility to her. A closer look revealed the hard core of her. I had the feeling that she wasn't a woman who knew how to cry at all.

"He's something of a brute, that man," she said, as we reached the buckboard. "Isn't he, Dan?"

"If he is, so am I."

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

"Matt Harbin is just a man who's had tough luck," I said. "Let's forget him."

I stowed the luggage up front, and Amberton helped his wife to the rear seat and got up beside her. I untied the grays, then climbed to the driver's seat. It occurred to me then that I'd forgotten one thing in my hasty preparations for their visit, some good whiskey. All I had at the Bar N was cheap rotgut, and I couldn't offer it to a man like Amberton.

I said, "I've got one stop to make, then we'll head for the ranch."

Swinging away from the station, I drove along Taos Street and halted the team before Doan's general store. From the corner of my eye, I saw that Louise and Steve Jarrett still stood talking in the doorway of the bank across the street. Or rather, they weren't talking now. They were looking my way, and I knew that they were, in small-town fashion, wondering who my guests might be. I passed the reins back to Amberton, got from the buckboard, and went into the Territorial Saloon. When I came out, I had two bottles of good bourbon wrapped in an old newspaper. The Jarretts were no longer at the door of the bank, but I could see them at the window. They didn't want to be obviously curious.

I climbed to the seat, lay my package beside me, took the reins from Amberton. I turned the rig, lifted the grays to a trot. The Jarretts, like all of San Alejandro, would hear of my fight with Matt Harbin. The loafers who had witnessed it would tell it around, and somebody would learn from Harbin just who my visitors were and so that would get around, too. Still, no matter how Harbin ran down Phil Amberton, Louise and Steve Jarrett would have the impression that I had pretty fancy friends.

I crossed the railroad tracks, and headed along the dusty road to my ranch.

Amberton had put Harbin out of his mind, and talked of campaigning against the Spanish in Cuba. He could keep a conversation going without any help, and so I put in only an occasional word or two. And his wife was silent the whole way.

But I could feel her gaze on me.

I didn't like it, her getting interested in me because I'd roughed up a man. I was getting to be a little afraid of her,

THERE WAS no need for me to apologize for my house. It was of adobe, and it wasn't just a one-room hut such as a bachelor might be expected to have. When it was built five years before, Pa had said, "We'll make a real home of it, Dan—against the day when you marry." So we'd had the Mexican laborers make enough adobe bricks for a good-sized four-room house. It was one-storied, of course, and U-shaped. The hollow of the U was a small patio, with a low wall closing it in at the front. There was a wooden gate in the patio wall. Pa had planted a flower garden, but since his death it had grown wild. I'd have to do something about it, some day.

There was a large, nicely furnished parlor, two bedrooms—one for me and my wife, according to Pa's plans, and the other for the son I was to have sired—and a big kitchen The house looked nice when we drove up, and I hoped that the interior of it would too. I'd sent Luis to fetch his sister Rosita to serve as housekeeper while the Ambertons were here, and when I'd set out for town that afternoon, she'd been busily cleaning the place.

Luis came to take the team, and he had on a clean shirt. I got off the buckboard, and said, "Luis, this is Major and Mrs. Amberton."

Luis took off his sombrero, bowed, smiled.

I told him to bring the luggage inside, and then, once Amberton had helped his wife down, I led them to the house. Mrs. Amberton said, "Dan, it's nice."

I said, "Thanks," and wondered if she meant that.

Rosita had the parlor looking tidy, and there were appetizing odors coming from the kitchen. I showed them into the bedroom that they were to occupy, and said, "Supper will be ready shortly. How about a drink before we sit down, Major?"

"That'll be fine, Dan."

"Right," I said, and went out to open one of the bottles of bourbon.

It wasn't as disagreeable as I'd anti-

cipated. In fact, it was sort of pleasant. I wasn't lonely that night, and I didn't have my usual craving for whiskey. Actually, I didn't drink half as much as Phil Amberton. Maybe it was my fight with Matt Harbin that had cured me of the need to drink. He'd made me see how loco a man can be when he mixes bitterness with too much rotgut.... Anyway, we sat in the parlor after supper, by the blazing fireplace, and for once the house seemed like a home.

Amberton did most of the talking, as I'd expected. And for a long time he talked only about the war. I began to have the feeling that the war had been the highpoint in his life, that nothing had happened to him before it. And that made me realize that I knew nothing about the man except that he had been my major and had bought some mules from me at a loco price.

His wife took no part in the conversation. She sat on the sofa, gazing into the fire in a dreamy sort of way. She had changed from her traveling clothes into a light gray dress, and she had fixed her hair differently. She not only didn't enter into the talk, but she didn't seem to take any of it in. She seemed bored again.

Amberton puffed on a cigar, very much at ease in his arm-chair. I began to wonder why he'd wanted to visit me; an ex-major being friendly with an ex-private seemed a little queer.

"By the way, Major," I said, "just what did you do with all those mules I shipped you a couple months ago?"

He laughed.

"What's the joke?"

"No joke, Dan," he said. "Why didn't you keep on shipping mules?"

I shrugged. "I must have been busy. How many broomtails did you want, anyway?"

"Well, I could take up to thirty thousand head."

I stared. "What?"

He reached for the glass I'd refilled. He was a little woozy, but not so that he didn't know what he was saying. "I'm not joking," he said. "Are there many mules to be had around here?"

"Not thirty thousand," I said, not understanding this. "There are plenty I could pick up here in the Territory, and more over in California. But not thirty thousand. Look....You'd pay thirty dollars a head?"

He took a drink. "Can you buy them for a good price?" he countered.

"Sure. Fifteen dollars a head."

"I can get fifty-five."

"This is crazy," I said. "Who'd pay fifty-five dollars for a mule?"

He laughed. "That's a business secret," he said. Then he turned business-like. "Dan, I came here to offer you a proposition. Are you open to an offer."

I hesitated.

He said, "You could use the money, couldn't you? A man who's planning to get married always needs—" He must have seen a queer look on my face. "Something wrong?" he asked. "Did I speak out of turn?"

"What makes you think I'm planning to get married?"

"Well, I heard in Cuba that you were engaged to a girl."

"You sure found out a lot about me."

"Remember my orderly, Sergeant Hankins?" Amberton said. "He was a great talker. He told me about you—and about a number of the more interesting men in our outfit. Was the sergeant mistaken about—"

His wife said, "Phil, you should have more tact."

I said, "It's all right. The girl married somebody else. It's a touchy subject with me. Don't mind my getting a little riled up. Maybe I would be open to a deal. What's your proposition, Major?"

"A partnership deal," he told me. "At the moment, my money is mostly—well, invested. I'm short of cash, and so I need a partner who'll put

up the capital to buy the mules. He'd get his investment back, plus a half share in the profits. If we succeed in buying only ten thousand head, we'd still make a fortune—a matter of four hundred thousand dollars less our expenses. And our expenses will be trifling. There's only one consideration, Dan. We've got to move fast."

"It sounds too good to be true."

He cocked an eye at me. "You don't trust me?"

"It's not that, but...."

"You'll have to let him in on the details, Phil," Mrs. Amberton said.

Amberton frowned, not liking that idea. He said, "If you turn me down, you could cut my throat by taking over my market. Not that I don't trust you, Dan...."

"If I don't go in with you, I won't bother with it at all," I told him. "And I don't know whether I want to worry myself with finding people with broomtails to sell."

A WORRIED look replaced Amberton's frown. "I was counting on you," he said. "It's important to me, Dan. I won't pretend that I'm doing you a favor. I need you—and your money. You understand, Dan?"

I savvied, all right. Without putting it into words, he was reminding me that he'd saved my life in that sugar cane field—and hinting that I was therefore in his debt. And I was aware of something more. His admission that he needed me and my money hadn't been easily made. Phil Amberton had a stiff pride, and he was vain. It hurt him to ask for help. So it was evident that he was reckless with the truth when saying that his money was invested; more likely he didn't have any money. No doubt he'd squandered the money he'd made off the mules I'd shipped. It could be that he was hard-up, in spite of his and his wife's glaring look of prosperity.

They were both watching me intently, anxiously. I took out makings and built a smoke, needing time to think. The mule deal sounded loco, but I had three thousand dollars in my bank saying it wasn't loco. Too, I was in his debt for having saved my life. And my old man had taught me to pay my debts. I didn't care about making a lot of money; I had nobody to share it with, now that I'd lost Louise. But I could square accounts with Phil Amberton by throwing in with him, and maybe the work involved would get me to thinking of something other than my loneliness and my need for whiskey.

I lighted my cigarette, and asked, "How much money do we need?"

Amberton looked relieved. "We should have a working capital of at least ten thousand dollars, Dan. Can you raise that much?"

I nodded.

"Good," he said. "And you can find the mules?"

"Buying and selling horses and mules is my trade, Major."

He smiled broadly. "I knew I'd picked the right man," he said. He lifted his glass. "Here's to the success of our partnership."

He drank.

His wife was smiling one of her rare smiles.

I dragged hard on my cigarette. "Now that we're partners," I said. "What are the details of this booming market in broomtails, Major?"

He chuckled. "You've heard of the Boer War over in Africa, Dan?"

I shook my head.

"Well, it's between the British and the Dutch settlers in Africa," he told me. "The Dutch are called Boers. It's the same sort of fighting that we did against the Spanish, and it looks as though the British Army is going to have a tougher time of it than we did. Anyway, they're preparing for a long war. They've got a buying commission in this country, and they're buying up horses and mules. Now it's not so difficult to get hold of horses here in the West, but few men handle mules. So it seemed to me that I could make more money selling mules, since I would have less

competition than if I sold horses. Do you know of the Pierce and Dunstan Commission Company of Kansas City, Dan?"

I nodded. Naylor & Son had often done business with that firm.

"John Dunstan is an Englishman, and so the firm is acting as agent for the British," Amberton said. "And I happen to be friendly with Dunstan. His company is receiving horses and mules at Bliss, Oklahoma."

"So that's the deal, eh?" I said. "When do you want to get started?"

"As soon as possible, Dan."

"How about tomorrow?"

Amberton nodded. "That will be fine," he said. He put down his glass and flung his cigar butt into the fire, then left his chair to sit beside his wife on the sofa. "Well, darling," he said. "I told you that we could count on Dan."

She said, "Yes, dear," with a hint of mockery.

AMBERTON put his arm about her, drew her close, began to stroke her hair. I gazed into the fire, but I'd have needed blinders not to have seen them from the corner of my eye. He kissed her lingeringly. Like I said, he was a little tipsy. She didn't respond to his love-making, that I could see. I wondered about her. About her looking bored all the time. I wondered if she was one of those frigid women I'd heard men talk about. Amberton kept fooling with her, and I was uncomfortable. It was always embarrassing to me to be a witness to somebody making love publicly. I threw my cigarette into the fire and got from my chair.

"I've got to have a look around outside," I said. "See you in the morning."

"Sure, Dan," Amberton said. "Goodnight."

I said, "Goodnight," and went outside.

There wasn't anything I needed to look after, for Luis saw to things. He had a little adobe house across the ranchyard for his quarters, and I looked at it in the hope that he was still up and I could go and talk a little with him. But his place was dark. Too, his sister would be sleeping there. I drifted over to the corrals and then into the barn, restless. It had got under my skin, seeing Amberton's intimacy with his wife. It made me too conscious that I had no woman of my own, that the woman I wanted was probably now lying in her husband's arms. I called myself a damn fool. I should forget Louise.

I saddled a bronc and struck out aimlessly across the moonlit range, and I rode all the way over to Largo Wells before turning back. I was out about two hours, but when I got home and put up the horse, I didn't feel much better. The good part of it was, I didn't have any craving for whiskey. That was a step in the right direction.

I sank into one of the wicker chairs in the patio and had a smoke, and I was sitting there for only a couple of minutes when I heard somebody come from the parlor. I didn't look around. I knew it was she....Amberton's wife.

She came slowly across the patio, passed in front of me, seated herself in one of the chairs. She was wearing a white silk wrapper over her nightgown, and white bedroom slippers. I kept my eyes off her. She was silent a long time.

Then: "Why'd she marry another man, Dan?"

"Money."

"And you hate her?"

"I think I do, sometimes."

"Why?"

"Why? That's a funny question."

"I mean, you really shouldn't blame her too much," she said. Her voice was hardly more than a husky whisper. It was a strange voice; it got under my skin. "Men can do anything to make money," she went on. "Work, fight, cheat, lie for it. But if a woman marries for money, she's considered—well, not nice."

I got it. She was admitting that

she had married Amberton for money.

She said, "But I'm surprised that she didn't wait for you."

"Waiting would have got her more, a lot more."

"And a handsome man, besides."

"Me, handsome?"

She laughed softly. "In a rough sort of way," she said. She was silent for a long moment, then: "I didn't come out here to pry into your love-life. I always have trouble sleeping. But not Phil. He can sleep like a log."

"Maybe he doesn't have anything on his conscience."

"Maybe he doesn't have any conscience."

I stared at her, wondering if she were serious. I said, "You been his wife long?"

"For nearly a year."

"He has good taste in women."

"Why, thank you, Dan," she said. "I wasn't sure that you'd noticed whether I was attractive or downright homely. And I didn't think you'd approve of me. I was a showgirl before Phil married me. Among other things. And I probably won't ever be completely domesticated. Of course, I don't think my husband has any complaints. I go through the motions of being a proper wife."

"If I were Phil Amberton," I told her, "you'd have to do more than go through the motions. For one thing, you'd have to get rid of that bored look."

"Do you think you could get rid of it for me?"

"Look; this conversation is getting a little too personal."

"Afraid of me, Dan?"

"Maybe."

"Am I dangerous?"

"I've a hunch that you are."

She laughed, pleased.

I sat there looking at her and thinking that in a dozen years Phil Amberton would be comparatively an old man and that she would still be a comparatively young woman. And I knew that was when she would be really dangerous. But not for me. The Ambertons would be gone from my life long before then.

She said, "You know, Dan, nobody could blame you if you kicked us out. This deal is a one-sided thing. Phil hasn't any money to put up. He isn't putting up anything but the knowledge of where to sell the mules." She waited for me to say something. When I didn't, she went on, "Now I've been honest with you. I don't know why I said that. For after all, if this partnership makes money for Phil.... Well, what's Phil Amberton's is mine. So it's silly of me to have said such a thing."

"Maybe you're an honest person."

She laughed scornfully. "I doubt that," she said, and rose. "I think I'll go back to bed. Maybe I'll be able to sleep now." She stood looking down at me. Then, mockery in her voice: "Goodnight, Dan. Pleasant dreams."

I watched her go into the house.

Then I swore under my breath. I wondered what she was trying to do to me.

CHAPTER IV

RIDING MEN

WE GOT started in the mule business the following morning. Or rather, I did. I rolled out of bed early, and sat down to eat breakfast with Luis. Rosita had it ready, and she said, "What of the other two, Dan?" She was a pleasant, buxom woman of forty. I'd been lucky to get her to come out to the Bar N. But she was a hustler and wouldn't approve of any laziness about the place. I hoped the Ambertons wouldn't sleep too late. But I said. "They're my guests, Rosita. They're city folks, and so their ways aren't our ways. Humor them. Will you, sweetheart?"

Rosita sniffed about city folks and smiled at my calling her sweetheart.

I told Luis, "I'm going back into the livestock business, *amigo*."

Luis said, "*Bueno*."

"You'll have to look after things here."

He nodded. Luis wasn't one to hold a conversation during a meal.

After breakfast, I went to the parlor. It was a long, low-ceilinged room. The end opposite the fireplace was where I had my desk, a bookcase, and a little iron safe. I knelt by the safe and worked the dial and swung the door open. Inside were some papers and a tin cash box. I carried the cash box to the desk, unlocked it with the key I kept hidden under the inkwell there. I got a wallet from a drawer, and then counted out five thousand dollars. Claire Amberton came from their bedroom as I was doing that.

She wasn't a late sleeper, apparently. She was wearing a pale blue dress that, I figured, was considered a housedress where she came from. It was about as plain as a cow country woman would wear for her Sunday best. It occurred to me that Phil Amberton had taken unto himself a pretty expensive wife. She wasn't quite so attractive that early in the morning, however. There were bluish smudges under her eyes and her cheeks had no color.

She said, "Good morning, Dan," and stood by the desk and watched me stuff that five thousand dollars into my wallet. Her eyes took on a speculative look.

I locked the tin box, put it back in the safe, locked the safe.

"The Major up?" I asked.

"No. And I don't think he will be for a while."

"Oh?"

"He always sleeps late," she said. "Are you going somewhere?"

I nodded. "There's a silver mine about twelve miles from here, and it's just about ready to close down," I said. "I may be able to pick up some mules there. How about waking the Major and asking if he wants to go along?"

She said, "All right," and went back to the bedroom.

When she returned to the parlor, she said, "He doesn't feel well, Dan." She smiled. "A hangover. Could I go with you?"

I hesitated. Then: "If it's all right with him."

"It is."

"All right. Go get your breakfast. I'll meet you outside."

I'd figured on riding, but now I went out and hitched up the grays to the buckboard. It was a fine, warm morning, and I was feeling better than I'd felt in some time. No hangover, no thirst, not even a touch of yellow-jack. And no loneliness. I'd just lighted up a cigarette when she came from the house. She'd changed into what she probably thought was the fashion with cow country women: a divided riding skirt, a mannish blouse, boots. She was carrying her hat, a narrow-brimmed and flat-crowned Stetson. There was a bright green silk scarf about her neck, drawn tight in cowhand style. Well, a few women hereabouts had taken to dressing like that. And she looked good.

She gazed at the buckboard. "I thought we'd ride horses."

"I didn't know if you could ride."

"Oh, I'm an accomplished horsewoman."

"Well, another day," I said. "Did you have breakfast?"

"A cup of coffee," she told me. "That's all I need."

I helped her into the buckboard, and we got started. I held the team to a fast trot, not being in any great hurry. We traveled three, four miles without talking, then she said, "Dan, I'm really not much of a horsewoman."

"No?"

"I rode a little when I was a kid, that's all."

"I won't hold that against you," I said and laughed.

"I just wanted you to know. I don't want to lie to you."

"That's fine."

"I lived on a farm," she said. "Outside of Philadelphia. My father was lazy and we were as poor as—like they say—as church mice. When I was fourteen, I was put out as a domestic. I was a maid in a big, fine house."

I didn't say anything.

"I was—well, big for my age," she went on. "The man of the house got notions about me after a while, and his wife sent me packing. I didn't go home. I went to Philadelphia and got a job in a factory. You ever work in a sweatshop, Dan? No, I guess not." She paused. Then: "On the farm, I used to ride the plow horses."

"A lot of difference between plow horses and cow ponies."

"Maybe you'll teach me to ride a cow pony?"

"Sure, Mrs. Amberton."

"Call me 'Claire,' won't you, Dan?"

I looked at her and said, "No, I don't think I will, Mrs. Amberton."

"Why not?"

"You're Phil Amberton's wife. That makes you Mrs. Amberton to me."

She flushed, and anger showed in her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "Don't flatter yourself that I want to become intimate with you."

She could be a real outspoken woman, you see....

THE LONELY Widow Mine had started out as a big operation, and for a couple of years the company that owned it had taken out of a lot of highgrade ore. Then a miner's pick had hit water, and the water had kept seeping in. The company had bought pumps, but the water kept coming faster than the pumps could get rid of it and now the tunnels where the silver ore was were flooded. The Lonely Widow was closed down except for a small crew that still manned the pumps without much hope. I talked to one of the men and learned that the company had some mules, but they'd been moved down to a corral near the town of San Marcos.

San Marcos was a grubby town on the west side of the hills, and when Mrs. Amberton and I got there we saw a plank building bearing a sign that read, *Lonely Widow Mine—Office.*" The superintendent, a man named Hanlon, was sitting in the office smoking his pipe. I talked mules with him.

He said, "Well, those critters are running up a big feed bil. But I'm not giving them away. I've got a hundred and twenty of them, all prime animals." He considered a moment, puffing on his pipe. Then: "Twenty dollars a head."

"Fifteen is what I'm paying."

"It's maybe what you hope to pay, friend."

"Sorry I bothered you," I said, and went out.

I drove around to the corral where the mules were being held, and I looked them over. My old man had taught me to look for the poor animals and not try to pick out the good ones when I was buying a big bunch of horses or mules. That's what I did now, perched on the corral fence, and there were a dozen in this bunch of broomtails that I wasn't going to buy.

Hanlon came over to the corral after a few minutes as I knew he would. I told him there were twelve in the bunch that I wouldn't touch. We haggled for about a half hour, and then, because livestock trading wasn't his game, Hanlon got tired of it. He said that if I'd take the whole bunch off his hands for fifteen hundred dollars, it was a deal.

I took him up on it, and went over to his office with him. I paid him his money, got a bill of sale, then I hunted around the town until I found two likely men, riding men, brothers named Garcia, whom I hired to drive the mules to San Alejandro. I told them I'd meet them there, and that they should get the bunch to San Alejandro by sundown.

"If you show me you can handle mules," I told them, "it may be that I'll have steady work for you boys."

Their grins showed that they liked that.

I went back to the buckboard, and took the road to San Alejandro. Mrs. Amberton looked bored, and since she'd told me not to flatter myself that she wanted to become intimate, she wasn't speaking to me.

We got to San Alejandro about four in the afternoon, and I turned the team over to Mike Sweeney who'd bought the Star Livery Stable from me. I told Mrs. Amberton that we'd get something to eat, and we walked along Taos Street to the Welcome Cafe. She still wasn't talking to me, and we ate in silence. When we left the restaurant, we ran into Steve Jarrett on his way home after a hard day's work at the bank.

He said, "How are you, Dan?" and tipped his hat, looking Mrs. Amberton over with interested eyes.

I had a feeling that he would have stopped for an introduction to her, but I just said, "I'm fine, thanks," and took Mrs. Amberton's arm and passed him.

She shrugged off my hand. "What's the idea?"

"I just wanted him to be sure you're with me."

"And why?"

"You're an attractive woman," I told her. "And he happens to be the man who married my girl. He'll go home and tell her he saw me with a mighty fancy woman, and she'll be jealous. You savvy?"

She said, "I'm glad I'm of some use to you," her tone frosty.

I spotted one of my horses over in front of the post office, and I wondered what Luis was doing in town. But it was Phil Amberton who came from the post office, and by his smile nobody would have known that I'd spent the day gallivanting about with his wife. Maybe he trusted her. Or me. Or maybe he just didn't have a jealous streak in him.

He said, when we crossed the street, "How'd it go, Dan?"

"Fine," I said. "Just fine."

"How many did you buy?"

"A hundred worth shipping."

"Oh," he said, disappointed. "Is that all?"

CHAPTER V

THE MONEY

AMBERTON explained that he'd ridden into town to mail a couple letters, then asked if there was anything I wanted him to do. "You give the orders, Dan," he said. "After all, you know this game and I'm a novice at it."

I told him that there was nothing to do but hang around and wait until the two Mexicans I'd hired arrived with the mules, except for my seeing Purd Adams the station master, and arranging for the cars to ship the bunch to Pierce & Dunstan Commission Company's agent at Bliss, Oklahoma. But I said, "If you're going back to the ranch, you can drive Mrs. Amberton there. The buckboard is at the livery stable. I guess she's a little tired. It was a tiring day for her."

Mrs. Amberton said, "Tiring is right."

Her husband looked at her, then back at me. "What's the trouble?" he asked. "Aren't you two hitting it off?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "We get along."

"Yes," she said. "We get along—just dandy."

He regarded her with raised eyebrows, then said, "It must have been tiring for you my dear. I can understand that mule-buying wouldn't interest a woman. Well, I'll take you to the ranch and you can rest." He started to turn away with her, but then faced me again. "By the way, Dan," he said. "I stopped in one of the saloons before going to the post office, and I bumped into Matt Harbin. He apologized for his behavior yesterday."

I was surprised. "He did, eh?"

"Yes. He seemed to feel quite badly about it."

"I'm glad he's got that much sense."

"He explained to me that he's been down on his luck ever since the war," Amberton continued. "I asked if there was anything I could do to help him get on his feet, and he said that he'd appreciate a job—any sort of a job. I told him that I'd talk it over with you, for no doubt we could use a good man. What do you say, Dan? It would be a fine thing, giving Harbin a chance to find himself."

"It's all right with me, Major."

"He'll be a good man, if he can keep himself in hand."

"Well, we'll give him a try," I said.

They went off toward the livery stable, and I got on the roan Bar-N bronc he'd ridden in. I rode down to the station and arranged with Purd Adams for four livestock cars, and he promised to have them on the siding to next day. I went over to the Star Livery later, and talked to Mike Sweeney. He was willing to take the twelve mules which I knew weren't worth shipping; he would try to sell them for a few dollars, and we'd split whatever they brought. I also arranged for him to supply feed for the mules to be shipped while they were held in the railroad shipping pens.

Matt Harbin showed up while I was talking to Sweeney, and he was sober. He said, "Dan, I want to apologize for the way I acted yesterday. I sure made a fool of myself."

"That's all right Matt. Forget it."

"I was talking to Major Amberton."

"Yeah. He told me. About a job, eh?"

Harbin nodded. He looked eager. "When can I start work Dan?"

"In a couple hours," I told him. "I've got a couple of Mexicans bringing in a big bunch of mules. You can help pen them, over at the tracks."

He nodded. He stared at the ground and shuffled his feet. Then, a little of the whine back in his voice: "You couldn't advance me a little on my wages, Dan? I ought to get myself a new shirt and a decent pair of pants. And a haircut."

I hesitated, and I guess I eyed him suspiciously.

He slanted a look at me, then his face turned ugly. "What's the matter?" he said. "Don't you trust me? You think I'm trying to put something over on you?"

I didn't answer but gave him twenty dollars.

And as he turned away, I had a hunch that Phil Amberton and I had made a mistake in hiring Matt Harbin.

WE SHIPPED that first bunch, and I kept busy buying more broomtails. We were ridding the countryside of broomtails, and I emptied my safe of money and all but cleaned out my account at the Cattlemen's Bank. It wasn't often that we'd locate as big a bunch of mules as the one at the Lonely Widow Mine. Sometimes I'd get a lead that would take me fifty miles and I'd get maybe only two or three animals. But mostly I'd be able to buy anywhere from ten to a hundred in a bunch.

I passed up a few good animals because word was getting around about my buying mules and some people jacked up their asking price. One man, in the Morada Hills, wanted thirty dollars for a bunch of critters that had been running wild in the mountains for more than a year. He would probably have taken, in the end, twenty if I had haggled. But I'd talked it over with Phil Amberton, but he was dead-set against paying more than fifteen dollars a head to anybody.

Our three hired hands, Matt Harbin and the two Garcia boys would pick up what mules I bought and drive them to the railroad pens at San Alejandro. Of course, some other men took notice of our shipping so many mules. A couple found out from Purd Adams just where we were shipping to, and to what dealer, and

they sent a telegram to the commission firm. But Amberton had Dunstan, of the Pierce & Dunstan Commission Company, posted and Dunstan replied to the telegram by saying that the firm wasn't interested in dealing with anybody but Amberton. We heard about these two men trying to get some of the business when Dunstan sent Amberton a letter.

There was no bank draft with the letter.

By the end of a month we'd shipped eight hundred thirty-two mules, and we hadn't received a cent in payment. Amberton would hang around the Bar N waiting for Jess Whittaker, the Star Route mail carrier, and sometimes he'd even ride out to meet him. But Jess never had any but that one letter from Pierce & Dunstan. I was beginning to worry.

I took it up with Amberton one night after supper. I hadn't been out buying for three days, for our capital had given out.

I said, "Major, we're sure out of business if we don't get some money soon. I figure you ought to prod your friend Dunstan a little."

"I sent him a wire yesterday, Dan."

"You should have had a reply to it today."

"Well, I tell you," Amberton said, "Pierce and Dunstan is a big outfit. They've got more to take care than this mule business. After all, their main line is cattle. We'll get our money as soon as they get around to sending it. That firm is as sound as the Bank of England."

"Just so it's on the level."

"It's a reputable firm, Dan."

"I always figured so, until now."

HE LIT a cigar. "There's no use marking time," he said easily. "The thing to do is to keep on buying and shipping. Every day you hold off, we're losing money."

"I've told you that I've got no money to do more buying."

"I know, Dan. But I've been thinking that we should borrow some."

"Borrow?"

"At the bank in San Alejandro," he said. "It's regular business procedure. That's what banks are for. Even the biggest businesses borrow money for operating expenses and expansion, at times. Even the government borrows." Then: "The people at the Cattlemen's Bank know you. You shouldn't have any trouble getting a loan."

"You don't know old Jason Wyatt," I said. "He wouldn't loan his wife, if he had one, a plugged dime without ten dollars' worth of security."

"Your ranch is clear, isn't it, Dan?"

"Clear?"

"It's not mortgaged?"

"No."

"Well, we could put it up as security," Amberton said. "I'm not familiar with the value of ranch properties, but I'd imagine that you could mortgage the Bar N for at least five thousand dollars."

I stared at him, and then, seeing that he was in earnest, I lost my temper. It was the first time I'd gotten riled up with him. "Nothing doing," I told him. "The ranch is all I've got left, and I'm not gambling with it. It's easy for you to figure out a scheme like that. You've got nothing to lose. Why, damn it, you haven't risked a dollar on this whole deal!"

"Now, Dan—"

"He's right, Phil," Claire Amberton said. "You're asking too much."

He gave her an angry look. "I'd thank you to keep out of this," he told her. "You're like every other woman, impractical. You lack business sense. You—"

"At least, I know Dan shouldn't run the risk of losing his home."

"Whose wife are you, anyway?"

She gazed straight at him. "When I give you reason to doubt that I'm yours," she said, "you won't need to wonder—you'll know."

Amberton swore, then got out of

his chair. "Dan, if you're afraid of this partnership," he said flatly, "we'll terminate it as soon as our money comes. I don't want an unwilling business associate." He went into their bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

I felt bad about it, and Mrs. Amberton saw that I did.

She said, "He doesn't mean a word of that, Danny." It was the first time she'd spoken in friendly fashion to me since the day we went to the Lonely Widow Mine. The day I'd refused to call her by her given name. "He won't call it quits. There's too much money involved. And this is the first time in his life that he's had a chance at big money."

"You think Pierce and Dunstan aren't pulling anything crooked?"

"I'm sure they're not, Danny."

"Well...."

"Don't think hard of him," she said. "Phil Amberton needs understanding. He's my husband, and I know him pretty well. He's always had big ideas and none ever worked until this one turned up. He's always talked big money...." She smiled wryly. "I guess that's how I became interested in him in the beginning. Because of his talk about making big money and being somebody important. Until now Phil Amberton has been nothing for a fourflusher, and this is his chance to amount to something. Go easy on him, Danny."

"All right," I said. "I'll go to the bank tomorrow."

"No."

"Why not? You're sure we'll get our money, aren't you?"

"I'm sure," she said. "But don't ever mortgage the Bar N. It's too nice a place to be offered as security to some soulless banker." She smiled. "I know you love it, Danny. And I.... Well, I'm going to hate to leave it."

The bedroom door opened, and Amberton said, yelling it, "Claire, you going to sit up all night?"

"No," she said. "I'm going shortly."

The door banged shut.

It was only about eight o'clock.

She smiled at me again, wryly this time, then slowly rose. "He's taking his anger out on me," she said. "He'll be over it by morning. I'll see to that." She had to pass me to get to the bedroom, and she touched my shoulder. "The money will come, Danny," she told me. Then she said something odd: "That's not what you've got to worry about."

I could still feel it where she'd touched me even after she was in the other room. And I didn't like that. I wasn't the kind of a man to let myself be interested in another man's wife. But I suddenly realized that I liked having her at the Bar N, that I was going to be lonely again when she was gone. More, I was aware that I no longer thought of Louise Dolan Jarrett. Because of Claire Amberton.

I could hear the angry rumble of Amberton's voice from behind the closed door, and all at once I resented him—because he was her husband. I swore, at myself, and got up and walked outside. There was a light burning over in the bunkhouse. Luis Morales, Matt Harbin and the Garcia brothers were playing poker. I could have gone over and sat in the game. But I didn't. I saddled a bronc and rode out—going nowhere.

The next day the money came.

CHAPTER VI

WITH A GUN?

THE BANK draft was for $38,500.00.... It was payment for seven hundred of the eight hundred thirty-two mules we'd shipped. Payment for the remainder would come in due time, Phil Amberton assured me. We were both in a good humor, and our fall-out of last night was forgotten. We'd made a profit of twenty-eight thousand dollars, less shipping costs and our other expenses which didn't amount to a great deal. And this was just the start of it.

I had Luis hitch up the buckboard, and Amberton and I drove into San Alejandro. We had no trouble at the bank; both Jason Wyatt and Steve Jarrett saw plenty of drafts from the Pierce & Dunstan Commission Company, and even old Jason treated us like we were somebody important. I took out five thousand in cash, to do more mule-buying, and the rest of the money was put in a joint account for Amberton and me. It was Amberton's idea. He explained that we could settle matters once the partnership was ended; that was, I would get back my investment, close to thirteen thousand dollars when we split our profits.

Jason Wyatt was a gaunt old man with a white goatee. He was past seventy, and I never could figure out why he liked money the way he did. He was too old and feeble to make use of anything it could buy. But I could see the greed in his still bright eyes now, as he treated Phil Amberton and me with the respect he figured money-men deserved. "You gentlemen certainly have a good thing in this mule business," he told us.

"Yes, sir," Amberton said. "It certainly is that."

"But it won't last long," I said. I had a hunch that Wyatt was scheming to cut in on the game. "Any day now, the market is apt to collapse."

"Oh, this Boer War could last for years," the banker said. "That's where all these mules are going, isn't it? To the British Army?"

Amberton started to say that was true, but I nudged him and said that there was some business we had to attend to in a hurry. When we got outside, I said, "We don't want to tell that old galoot too much, Major. He's apt to put men out to buy up broomtails."

"But he's a banker."

"Yeah. And he'll do anything for money, just so it's not so far on the wrong side of the law that he'd get in trouble. I'm wondering why he hasn't jumped into the game before now."

"He probably realizes that Pierce & Dunstan has given me a free field out here in Arizona."

"Yeah," I said, "But if he started buying up mules on a large scale, he could force us to deal with him—at his price."

Amberton said, "Heaven forbid," but he wasn't worried about Jason Wyatt. But suddenly I was. It was just a hunch, but I was afraid that the old banker was going to make trouble for us.

Amberton went over to the Territorial Saloon and bought a whole case of New Orleans bourbon. "We'll have a celebration," he said, and he stowed it aboard the buckboard. And when we got back to the ranch, he told Luis to open the case. The damn fool gave Luis a bottle, and each of the other three hands—Matt Harbin, Miguel and Esteban Garcia—when they came from the bunkhouse. I knew Luis wouldn't get drunk, but I didn't know how the Garcias were with whiskey, and I was a little afraid of what it might do to Matt Harbin because Matt had done a good job on himself, he'd been a good hand.

Amberton carried the rest of the bourbon into the house, and he gave Rosita a bottle. Then he opened one and poured three big drinks. It was my first in some time, and I didn't care whether I took it or not. He gave a glass to his wife, and she said, "Well, what have I to lose?"

Amberton said, "A toast. Here's to three of us, and to our getting rich!"

We clinked glasses all around, and Amberton downed his drink in a gulp. I stretched mine out, and it didn't matter to him that his wife and I didn't match him drink for drink. He kept tossing them off, and it wasn't long before he was feeling good. He talked and laughed, and he danced a jig. I was a little surprised after a time to see Claire refill her glass. I'd never known a drinking woman before; that is, none outside of a honkytonk.

Amberton finally quieted down and

dozed off on the sofa. Claire came to where I sat slumped in an armchair, weaving a little and laughing because of her unsteadiness. I told her she'd better go easy.

"It's not my first time," she said. "I've drunk with Phil before."

"Why?"

"Why? Because he wanted me to, that's why. And because it makes me feel all funny. You ever feel all funny, Danny?"

"You'd better go lie down, too."

"I like you, Danny."

I stood up. "Quit it," I said, getting sore.

She wasn't laughing now. She gazed at me solemnly. "I like you, Danny," she said. "And I'm not going to do anything to hurt you—not ever." She shook her head. "No, I'm not, Danny. I'm not going to do anything to hurt nice Danny."

I walked out of the house, to be safe.

I WAS RIGHT about old Jason Wyatt. He put somebody out to buy up mules, and that somebody was nobody other than Steve Jarrett. I made a trip to Tucson and looked up Hernandez de Baca, a livestock dealer with whom Naylor & Son had done business in the past. De Baca said, "You are too late, my friend. I sold as many mules as I could find, only two days ago. To a mah named Jarrett."

"Steve Jarrett?"

"*Si.* He said he was from San Alejandro."

I went to Valido, and bought a half dozen mules in the town and then rode out to a ranch owned by a man named Gomez. Somebody in Valido told me that Gomez had quite a few mules, and I found that he did. I was looking for his bunch, which his vaqueros had brought in from the hills, when Steve Jarrett drove up in a buggy. He nodded to me, gave me a twisted smile.

"How much did he offer you, Senor Gomez?" he asked.

The ranchero cocked an eye at me.

I said, "Fifteen dollars a head."

Jarrett said, "Twenty."

I said, "*Buenas dias, senor,*" and got on my horse and rode away.

It was a seventy-mile ride back to Bar N Ranch. When I got there, late in the afternoon, Phil Amberton was taking it easy in the patio. Claire was sitting near him, reading a book. I dropped into a chair, dead-beat.

Amberton talked around his cigar. "What's wrong, Dan?"

I felt like telling him there was plenty wrong when one partner sat around drinking good whiskey, smoking expensive cigars and having the company of a good-looking wife while the other partner got saddle sores from riding on a mule-hunt. But I just said, "Banker Wyatt is buying mules."

"Oh?"

"His man is paying twenty dollars a head."

"Mr. Wyatt should stick to banking."

"He bought eighty head that we won't get, over at Valido," I said. "And I don't know how many more at Tucson."

"Who is the man doing his buying?"

"Steve Jarrett."

"Something had better be done."

"Yeah," I said. "We'll have to up our price—outbid him."

Amberton shook his head. "I've made up my mind that fifteen dollars is the limit," he said. "I was thinking that something else could be done. I've met Jarrett, and I think I know what kind of a man he is. We'll let Matt Harbin take care of him. Matt should, be willing—say, for a hundred dollars."

"Take care of him how? With a gun?"

"Oh, we won't go to such extremes," he said. "But if Matt should lay for him, give him a roughing-up...."

I stared. This was a side of Phil Amberton that I hadn't known about, and I didn't like it. "I won't go for that," I said. "You put Matt up to a

thing like that and I'll bust up this partnership."

"When you've got competition in business, Dan, you've got to be ruthless."

"My old man and I never did business like that."

"Your father and you weren't too successful, either."

Claire said, "He's right, Phil. You can't have Matt Harbin do such a thing. You can't trust him. He might kill Jarrett."

Amberton shrugged. "Like always," he said sourly, "the two of you are against me." But he wasn't in too bad a humor. He added, "By the way, Dan. Payment came for that other one hundred eighty-two head in today's mail. I deposited it in our account. Seven thousand two hundred sixty dollars."

I nodded. "I've been thinking that we'll have to shift operations to the western part of the Territory," I said. "Maybe even to California. That'll give us the jump on Steve Jarrett, for a little while at least. Besides, there aren't many mules left around here. I'll take Matt and the Garcia boys along. We could leave on tomorrow's train."

"Whatever you say, Dan," Amberton said.

I TOOK TWENTY thousand dollars with me, and it was smart of me. For I went to California first, and there were quite a few mules on the *ranchos* and at the old missions. I bought and shipped a thousand head within a month's time—and before Steve Jarrett showed up and upped the price. I knew he was around a week before I ran into him, for whenever I offered fifteen dollars a head, those Californios smiled and turned me down in their polite way. They had a grapevine that spread the news, I guess. Anyway, none of them would sell at my price.

I ran into Jarrett at a rancho near Santa Ana, and he was real friendly. He was a different man. He felt big, important. I could see that he liked mule-buying better than working as a bank teller. He offered his hand, and I took it. It was surprising to me, but I no longer held it against him for having won Louise away from me.

"How's it going, Dan?"

"You should know."

He laughed. "It's just business," he said. "Nothing personal, you know."

"I know," I said. "And I wish you luck."

"Luck?"

"I'm not sure you can unload the broomtails you're buying up."

Some of his confident look left him. But after a moment, he said, "Mr. Wyatt is too old a hand to make a mistake. He contacted Pierce and Dunstan, and they sent word that he should get in touch with Major Amberton if he had mules to sell. That didn't faze the old boy at all. He gave me the money and told me to start buying. We're shipping them to San Alejandro, and Mike Sweeney is holding them for us. You—"

"You're going to have quite a feed bill, Steve."

"True. But we'll still come out ahead."

"You figure on selling to Amberton and me, eh?"

"You're going to have to buy from us sooner or later, or go out of business.

I rolled and lighted a cigarette. "Was it your idea, Steve?"

"Well, in a way. I suggested it, but Uncle Jason liked it."

"What are you to get out of it, just your salary?"

He smiled. "No, indeed," he said. "Uncle Jason was good enough to promise me a third share in the profits. It's a great opportunity for me." He slapped me on the back. "When you're ready to buy some mules, Dan, just let me or Mr. Wyatt know."

"Sure," I said, and turned away.

I felt sorry for him. He and Wyatt planned to hold us up; they were paying twenty dollars a head, and no doubt they'd ask at least forty. But

Phil Amberton was mighty stubborn about paying more than fifteen.... It looked as though Steve Jarrett was in for a big disappointment. More, he was apt to get his Uncle Jason down on him. Yeah, I felt sorry for him.

I wasted ten more days in California, and shipped only one more carload of mules. It was a short one, at that; only twenty-seven head. So with my three hired hands, I went to Bakersfield and took the train to Needles, Arizona.

I bought horses and campgear and provisions, then set out up the Colorado River to the silver mines. In two weeks, I'd bought three hundred mules and was out of money. We drove the bunch back to Needles, shipped from there, and I sent a telegram to Phil Amberton to let him know that I needed more capital. I left Matt Harbin there to wait for the Major, or his reply, and went back upriver with Miguel and Esteban. We set up camp about fifty miles from Needles, and I spent the best part of a week riding from one mine to another and visiting the grubby settlements along the Colorado. I made deals for about two hundred critters, promising the owners I'd be back with cash money shortly.

When I got back to our camp, Amberton wasn't there. Nor was Matt Harbin. But Steve Jarrett was, with a couple of hired hands. He was still friendly. He was in camp a little distant away from mine, but he came to visit as soon as I got in. We shook hands. Miguel Garcia handed me a cup of coffee.

I said, "Steve, who's keeping you posted?"

"What do you mean, Dan?"

"Wherever I go, you show up. Somebody's tipping you off to my moves."

"You're guessing, Dan."

"Yeah. And my guess is—Matt Harbin."

He didn't say anything, but he looked sheepish. I let it pass. If he was paying Harbin a little money to tip him off to my movements so I could lead him to the mules, I wasn't going to raise cain about it. Live and let live, I figured. Amberton and I were doing better than all right; we were getting rich. It must have been that I had a secret hope that Steve Jarrett would make some money out of the game; I'd come to like the man. Too, if he made some money, it would make life better for Louise.... I was feeling charitable; I wanted her to be happy. Sure, I was peeved about Matt Harbin's petty double-cross. But at the same time I didn't blame him too much. He was working for the cow country's usual poor wages, and the men paying those wages were making a fortune. Yes, he had reason to want to make a little money on the side—even if he had to do me dirt. I decided then that once we were done buying mules I would give Harbin and the Garcias a nice bonus, even if it had to come out of my share of the profits.

I told Jarrett, "I've contracted for mules at a half dozen places. I could get real sore if you went and got those people to go back on their word to me."

He considered a moment, then said, "Tell me who they are and I'll stay away from them. Honest, Dan."

I told him, and, surprisingly, he did.

He was a man of his word, Steve Jarrett was.

The same couldn't be said for my partner, Major Phil Amberton.

CHAPTER VII

THE BUSHWHACKER

JARRETT and his men pulled out the next morning, heading upriver. I left the Garcia brothers in camp, and rode over to a Mexican town I'd heard about in Needles. It was just a half dozen adobe huts in the middle of nowhere, and I found no mules. When I got back to camp, Matt Harbin had gotten in with Phil Amberton—and Mrs. Amberton. They'd

hired a horse and buggy at Needles, and they'd come to stay awhile. They'd brought along a tent, and it was already pitched when I rode in. They were at supper.

I off-saddled my horse and washed up at the creek, and Miguel Garcia, who was doing the cooking, had a tin plate of grub and a cup of coffee ready for me when I walked over to the fire.

"Looks as though you expect to stay a while, Major," I said. "But I guess you didn't know what you were letting yourself in for, eh, Mrs. Amberton?"

Amberton said, "We'll stay for a few days, Dan. And the little woman just wouldn't be left behind. Now she'll have to rough it and like it."

He smiled at his wife, but she merely gave him one of her chill looks. She didn't say anything to me, either. She sat there picking at her food, frowning. I didn't let it bother me. She was either overly friendly toward me, or she ignored me. Sometimes I had the feeling that she hated me—and her husband, and the whole world.

Amberton said no more then, but went on eating. Matt Harbin eyed me sullenly, and I supposed that he felt a little guilty because it was he who was responsible for Steve Jarrett showing up in the Colorado River country. Maybe too he figured that I was on to him by now. The Garcias usually talked and joked and laughed a lot, but tonight they too were quiet. It was a gloomy group.

Claire went to the tent as soon as she finished eating, and a few minutes later Amberton rose and walked away. He went and leaned against a boulder near the tent, and lighted a cigar. I went over to him when I finished my meal.

I said, "Steve Jarrett is here."

Amberton didn't let it bother him. "Oh?" he said.

"You still want to hold the price at fifteen dollars?"

"Many mules around here?"

"Not many. I've contracted for a couple hundred."

"Then we'll move on when you've bought and shipped them, and leave this territory to Jarrett. I've been thinking we should work New Mexico next."

I nodded. "Sounds like a good idea," I said. And I promised myself that I'd give Matt Harbin no chance to tip off Jarrett this time. I added, "I shipped three hundred from Needles, and a thousand from California. I figure that when we get paid for them and the two hundred I'll pick up here, we'll have more than a hundred thousand dollars in our account. Our profit should run about ninety thousand, Major."

"Yes," he said, puffing on his cigar. "Ninety thousand or a little better."

I eyed him, puzzled. He was taking it calmly, too calmly. He didn't seem interested enough to talk about it. "How long do you think this can last?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Pierce and Dunstan will take up to thirty thousand mules," he told me. "We haven't shipped three thousand yet."

"Still, they must be getting mules from other parts of the country."

"Maybe. But don't worry about it."

Somehow, he rubbed me the wrong way tonight. I said, "Hell, I'm not worrying about anything. Not with more than a hundred thousand dollars in bank. I'll pull out early in the morning, to bring in those broomtails. You probably won't be awake. So how about giving me the money now?"

He took out his wallet, saying, "I brought ten thousand along. I'll give you half. That'll be three thousand to pay for the animals you've contracted for, and give you two thousand more in case you can pick up a few more."

I put the money in my own wallet.

And said, "I'll leave Miguel here to look out for you and Mrs. Amberton. Esteban and Matt can handle the mules."

He said, "Take Miguel. I'd rather have Matt here."

"I doubt that he's much of a cook."

"No matter," Amberton said, "I'd rather have him here at camp."

He half turned away then, leaning against the boulder and puffing on his cigar. I took the hint and walked away. I didn't know what ailed him. I told myself that it might be that he'd had a spat with his wife. Anyway, if he didn't want to talk to me—well, all right.

It was nearly dark then, and I told the Garcia boys that we'd pull out at sunup. I told Harbin that he was to stay at the camp, adding, "The Major wants you here."

He said, "I know it," and gave me a scowling look.

I spread my bedroll and used my saddle for a pillow. I bedded down about fifty feet from the fire, because I liked to sleep alone. I'd had my fill of sleeping close to other men in the Army. I rolled and lighted a cigarette, and smoked and looked up at the stars. I wasn't sleepy.

Harbin and the Garcia brothers bedded down near the dying fire, and finally Amberton went into the tent. I smoked my cigarette short, then got rid of the butt. I was keyed up, and for some reason I couldn't hit on I felt low in my mind. There was something wrong. Maybe it was between the Ambertons. If it was, then it shouldn't bother me. But still I felt low.

I dozed off after a long time, then some sound woke me. I sat up, listening. They were arguing, over in the tent. I could hear the rumble of Amberton's voice, and the higher tones of his wife's voice. I couldn't make out his words, but suddenly I heard Claire say furiously, "I won't have any part of such a scheme, I tell you!"

Then there was the sound of a slap. And a woman's scream.

And silence.

After a moment Miguel Garcia came from his bed and knelt beside me. He put his lips close to my ear, and whispered, "You think we should do something, boss? He may harm her."

"His wife," I said. "Let's forget it."

He nodded, and reluctantly returned to his blankets.

I lay back, but I couldn't forget that Amberton had hit her. And I couldn't sleep, either. I lay there hating him. Yeah.... Hating him.

THE THREE of us ate breakfast in the gray dawn, then saddled our horses. I glanced toward the tent before mounting, but of course saw nothing of either of the Ambertons. But just after I swung to the saddle, Claire called to me. "Dan!" Her voice was shrill. "Dan!"

I swung my horse about and rode toward her.

Matt Harbin came from his blankets, muttering, "What's going on?" He had his gun in his hand.

She was standing at the entrance to the tent, holding back the flap. She was in her nightdress, barefooted. Her hair was tousled. There was a bruise on her left cheek. Just as I reined in, Amberton appeared beside her. He took her by the arm. I could see her shudder.

Amberton said, "You didn't want to say anything to him, now did you, my dear? Tell Dan it's nothing. Say that you're sorry you bothered him."

She looked at me with frightened eyes, then away from me. "It's nothing," she said thickly. "I'm sorry, Dan, but— Well, it's nothing."

"Nerves," Amberton said. "Women suffer from bad nerves, Dan."

I didn't savvy it, and I didn't like it. I said, "Major, don't ever hit her again while I'm around to know about it. Don't make that mistake."

He didn't say anything, but his eyes turned ugly.

I wheeled my horse about, rode past Matt Harbin who stood there with his gun in his hand, and joined the bewildered looking Garcia brothers. We rode for perhaps a mile without talking.

Then Esteban said, "Boss, I think Harbin would have shot you in the

back if you'd started anything with Senor Amberton."

That gave me a start. I hadn't thought of that.

But I knew that it was true. Matt Harbin would have shot me if I'd got down off my horse and got rough with Amberton. For some reason, those two had become thick as thieves. Behind my back, they'd come to some sort of an agreement about something. And Claire knew about it. That's what she had wanted to tell me. She must have stayed awake all night, waiting for a chance to speak to me. But for once her husband hadn't been a heavy sleeper.

I had no more idea what Amberton was up to than I could understand why Claire should want to warn me about it. But I was sure of one thing. I was in love with her. Because of her, I'd got over feeling badly over losing Louise. Because of her, I was no longer lonely. I wasn't a man to want another man's woman, and I knew that Claire wasn't my sort. But I'd fallen in love with her. That's why I hated Phil Amberton for hitting her.

It occurred to me that maybe this trouble had come of Amberton's sensing that I was in love with his wife, and hated me for it. Then I was jolted by the thought that maybe it was more than that, that maybe he thought that Claire was interested in me. It had to be that, I told myself.

And I felt bad about it. I didn't want to be in love with her, and I didn't want her to be interested in me.

By mid-afternoon we'd visited four of the men who had promised me mules, and we had a hundred thirty head ready to be driven to our camp. I told Miguel and Esteban to start out with them, that I'd go around to a mining camp where a man had a dozen critters for me. I figured that I would take those twelve to camp, myself. Then the following day we could finish up here along the Colorado.

This mining camp was about three miles from where I parted from the Garcias, and those three miles were through rough country. I'd reached about the halfway point when I reined in and took out makings.

And I was lighting my smoke when a rifle shot racketed.

The slug screamed past my head, so close that I imagined I felt the hot breath of it. Then I lost my cigarette and grabbed for my Winchester and dropped from the saddle. The second shot came as I hit the ground. My horse gave a shriek, and went down in a thrashing heap. The next instant it was still, dead. It had been shot in the head.

That was smart figuring, I realized. Whoever was gunning for me had made sure that I couldn't ride out. I cursed the man, under my breath, and I had a good notion that it was Matt Harbin.

A third slug kicked dirt into my face, and I knew I had to find cover.

There was plenty of it, all around. Boulders, gullies, clumps of mesquite.

I jumped up, ran.

Two shots probed for me, but I made it safely to a cluster of small rocks. I jacked a cartridge into the Winchester's firing chamber.

And I yelled, "All right, Matt! Try and get me now!"

And he yelled, "It'll be a pleasure!" He was sure of himself.

CHAPTER VIII

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

AND SURE of me.

He drove a couple more shots at me, one ricochetting screamingly. He was only about a hundred yards away, and I could explain his missing me with his first shot only because he'd been too anxious. Like me, he was among some rocks. I located him by the haze of powdersmoke hanging over his position. He would be hard to reach.

I knew how it was with Harbin. He'd hated me ever since that day

when I roughed him up, the day Amberton arrived at San Alejandro. He'd kept his hatred to himself, of course, so as to land a job with me. I wondered vaguely, as I crouched there and tried to catch sight of him, if he hated Amberton too.

Maybe he did, just as he hated me. But I wasn't fooled. He'd made a deal with Amberton, and the two of them were in on this attempt on my life—even if the Major wasn't here. And I knew why they wanted to murder me.

That bank account in the Cattlemen's Bank at San Alejandro.

I shouted, "Matt! You hear me, Matt?"

"What do you want, hombre?"

"How much did Amberton promise you?"

He came right back: "How much are you carrying, Naylor?"

So that was it. Amberton had told him to go help himself to the money I was carrying. A little more than three thousand dollars. I shouted, "You've turned bushwhacker too cheap, Matt. What I'm carrying isn't worth the risk you're running. You—"

A slug thudded into the rock in front of me.

I'd talked brave, but I wasn't feeling that way. The advantage was with Harbin; I still hadn't spotted him, even though I knew he was among those boulders. Too, his position was better than mine. I was crouched behind a rock, but it was so small that I had to stay crouched, or lie flat, to keep from exposing myself. Harbin's cover was adequate. His rocks were huge boulders and rock slabs; he could not only shoot from a standing position, but also move about and change positions if I made it too hot for him. I didn't underestimate him, either. Matt Harbin had been a good soldier, and he'd killed plenty of Spaniards. He knew how to go about killing, from experience.

I slammed three fast shots in among his rocks, at a point just below where I'd seen the powdersmoke a moment ago. When I stopped firing, his laughter sounded and he shouted, "Try again, Naylor!" And he cursed me.

He sniped at me, and I took a prone shooting position and tried to bead him from the side of my boulder. I had a glimpse of him now, but missed him with my shot. And no sooner had I squeezed it out than he put a slug so close to me that a startled grunt escaped me.

I'd been worried before, but now I was scared.

It was just a matter of time before he'd get me square in his sights. I watched a little dust-devil swirl across the open space between us, and it gave me an idea. I could feel the breeze on my face, and it seemed just strong enough.

I put down my rifle and took out my wallet.

The money Amberton had given me was in one-hundred and fifty dollar bills, all fairly new and crisp. I began crumpling them slightly, so that the wind could carry them along the ground easily. The wind was from the west, and Harbin and I were shooting at each other from north and south.

I yelled, "Hey, Matt! Take a look!"

Without exposing myself, I began tossing handfuls of crumpled bills out from the rocks. The wind began to play with them, rolling them away from me. I threw out another handful. I didn't know if he could identify those yellow-backed bills as money, but it seemed that he should guess what I was doing.

"There's the money, Matt!" I shouted. "The wind's carrying it away!"

I tossed out the rest of it.

Maybe it was a crazy thing to do, throwing away more than three thousand dollars. But I figured my life was worth more than any amount of money. No sound came from Harbin as the wind carried the money farther and farther across the sandy ground. It would soon be out of sight. In a

few hours, if the wind held, it would be so widely scattered that little of it could be recovered. I readied my rifle and waited for greed to drive Harbin crazy.

A gust of wind swept up a money-garnished dust cloud.

And that got a rise out of the man.

I heard his bellow of rage, then he started a wild shooting. I hugged the ground. I counted his shots, and when he stopped shooting and I knew his rifle was empty, I came erect and leapt atop the boulder that had given him cover. I was wholly exposed. But I could see Harbin. He was shoving cartridges into his rifle. I swung my .30-30 to my shoulder and drove my shot home.

Afterward, after I was sure he was dead, I felt bad about it. Even though it had been his life or my own....

I RODE HARBIN'S horse. I rode slowly, reluctant to face Phil Amberton. It was hazy dusk when I sighted the camp. The Garcias had gotten in with the mules, and Esteban was keeping an eye on them while Miguel cooked supper. The mules were in a rope corral. The horse I was riding was a gray, and the one I'd lost had been a sorrel. And in the poor light, Amberton recognized my mount as Harbin's—and took it for granted that it was Harbin coming in.

He called, "How'd it go, Matt?"

If I'd had any doubts of his guilt, I lost them now. In his eagerness to learn if Harbin had killed me, he'd given himself away. I dismounted and walked into the camp, and Amberton came forward from where he'd again been lounging against the boulder near the tent. He was smoking a cigar.

He grabbed the cigar from his mouth and uttered a grunt.

I walked past the cookfire, faced him. "Yeah, Major," I said. "It's me. Harbin's lying dead. And he's dead because of you."

He was badly jolted, but he was always quick-witted. "Dan, what do you mean?" he said, acting surprised. "Matt's dead? What are you talking about?"

Claire came from the tent, and relief showed on her face at sight of me.

I wasn't going to let him get away with his pretense of innocence. I wanted there to be no doubt in his mind that I was sure of his guilt. I said, "He died slow. He talked before he died." Amberton couldn't know I was lying. "He told me that you'd put him up to trying to kill me, that his pay was to be the money I carried, that you wanted me dead so that our joint bank account would be all yours."

"He lied!" Amberton said. "Dan, you don't believe a word of what he said?"

"Claire...."

"Yes, Dan?"

"This morning you wanted to tell me something," I said. "You wanted to warn me that they'd worked out a scheme to kill me. Is that right?"

"I can't answer that, Dan," she replied. "He's my husband."

"You've answered it," I told her. "Last night you quarreled with him. You knew then about his deal with Harbin, and you tried to argue him out of it."

She came forward, stood close to her husband. She looked tormented. "Dan, I'll tell you this much," she said. "He—"

Amberton whirled and slapped her across the face so hard that she fell. I lost my temper then. I jumped at him. I drove my fist into his face. He cried out, went reeling backwards, fell against the tent, slid to the ground. I went after him and caught him by the throat, and I would have killed him if Claire hadn't picked herself up and come and pulled me away from him. She kept hold of my left arm. And she looked down at him with contempt.

"Now I will talk," she said.

"You've hit me once too often, Phil. Once too often.... You're right about him, Dan. But you don't know all of it. You don't know what sort of a man he is. He—"

He cursed her, sprawled there on the ground and rubbing his throat.

She ignored him. "He has a nasty mind, Dan," she said bitterly. "Last night he wanted to use me against you. He wanted me to go to you when everybody was asleep, then he would 'surprise' us—and pretend to be the outraged husband. He would have shot you then, he and Harbin. That was their first plan. Their second was for Harbin to ambush you if I wouldn't do as I was told. When I refused, he hit me...."

She was crying. The woman I thought couldn't cry was crying.

She went on, "But he'd planned such a thing from the very start, Dan. He brought me along as part of his scheme. I was to play up to you, so that it would look right when he played the wronged husband. For a little while at first I tried to get you interested in me, but then the idea sickened me. It was so low, so rotten.... Dan, he got word from Pierce and Dunstan before we came out here that they would take only a few more mules. That's why he decided that now was the time for you to die."

"He played me for a sucker from the start, eh?"

"He couldn't stand the thought of sharing all that money with you."

"I ought to kill him," I said savagely.

"No," she said. "No, Dan—No!"

I shook my head. "No," I told her. "I'll let him get away with it."

I turned away, took two steps toward the cookfire. Then Claire cried, "No, Phil!" I whirled.

Amberton was rising, with a gun in his hand. The roar of his shot blasted in my surprised brain, and I staggered under the jolt of the slug tearing into me. I grabbed for my six-shooter as I began to fall, and I got it out and thumbed back the hammer and squeezed the trigger just as he was about to fire again. I saw him collapse, then I was flat on my face and barely conscious.

PHIL AMBERTON and Matt Harbin were buried at Needles, and the Garcia brothers—with Claire Amberton's help—squared me with the law. There was no doctor at Needles, and the slug was dug out of me by a storekeeper named Burton. I made the train trip to San Alejandro in a baggage car, lying on a bed the Garcia brothers rigged up for me. At San Alejandro, they carried me on a stretcher to Doc Mercer's office. Mercer worked on my wound—it was in my left side—and then Miguel and Esteban took me out to the Bar N by wagon.

Once I was home and in my own bed, Rosita Morales took care of me. I was a troublesome patient. Along with my wound, I had an attack of malaria. I was as sick as a dog for ten days. I was delirious because of fever a lot of the time. Those ten days were one long nightmare. But finally I whipped the yellowjack, and then I was just shaky with weakness.

Finally I couldn't stay in bed any longer, and I had Luis give me a scrubbing with yellow soap and a shave. He helped me dress, and helped me out to the patio so I could sit a little while in the sun. I dozed off after a few minutes, and then woke to hear a woman's voice.

My pulse began to race, but it wasn't Claire who came to visit me.

It was Louise Jarrett.

I tried to hide my disappointment when I greeted her.

She said, "How are you, Dan? We—Steve and I—have been worried about you."

"I'll be my old ornery self in a few more days," I said. "How's Steve doing?"

It was as though a shadow crossed her face, and I saw now the trouble in her eyes. I knew why she had

come. Her husband was in a jam. I said, "How many mules is he stuck with, Louise?"

"About twelve hundred," she said. "And Mr. Wyatt is furious about it. He blames Steve. More than twenty-four thousand dollars of the bank's money is tied up in those mules and.... Oh, Dan! I'm frightened. I'm afraid Steve will lose his job. Jason Wyatt is such an unreasonable person!"

I felt sorry for her. That's all the feeling she aroused in me. I said, "Tell Steve to ship those mules to Pierce and Dunstan, in the name of Amberton and Naylor. I don't know whether or not they'll be accepted, but.... Well, it's the only chance Steve's got. If Pierce and Dunstan buy them, Steve will be in the clear and have made himself a lot of money. If they don't buy them, then he'll be in a worse jam with old Wyatt. But I've a hunch there'll be no trouble."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, Dan," she said, "you're so good."

Yeah, but I sure wasn't a good businessman. I could have bought those mules for a song.... But it turned out that Pierce and Dunstan accepted all of the shipment except seventy head which didn't meet specifications. A bank draft came in the mail, for sixty-three thousand eight hundred dollars. There was a letter accompanying, and it informed me not to ship any more broomtails. I endorsed the draft over to Steve Jarrett, and had Luis Morales take it to him. That same day Steve and Louise drove out to thank me, and everything was nice and friendly between us.

Another thing that proved I wasn't a good businessman was my giving Miguel and Esteban each a bonus of a thousand dollars when I told them that I no longer needed them. I took care of Rosita too. But there was nothing I could do for Luis. All he wanted was his job at the Bar N.

There was still more than a hundred thousand dollars in the Amberton-Naylor account at the bank, and Claire, as Amberton's widow, had a claim on half of it after I deducted my original investment of thirteen thousand dollars.

But I hadn't seen her since the day that storekeeper dug the slug out of me at Needles. I worried about her, until I remembered that her husband had had five thousand dollars on him when he died. I figured she'd taken that when she went to wherever she'd gone to. I waited a couple of months, but no letter came from her. So I hired a detective agency in Denver, Colorado, to find her. That outfit spent three months and a lot of my money to locate her not far from San Alejandro. She was living in Phoenix.

In a little adobe house.

When she opened the door and saw me, she gasped and grew pale. I stepped inside and closed the door.

"Dan," she said. "Dan, you shouldn't have tried to find me."

"I had to. I owe you a lot of money."

"I don't want it. I won't touch it."

"That's foolish. It's yours. You were his wife."

"I want to forget that I was."

I looked at her with my pulse racing and my blood coursing swiftly in my veins. "I had to find you for another reason," I said. "I want you. I want you for my wife."

She cried, "No!"

"Because I killed him?"

"I don't blame you for that, Dan. It was self-defense."

"Then why—"

"I'm not a nice person, Dan. I'm not good enough for you."

"I still want you."

"No," she said. "No, Dan. Find yourself a different sort of woman. A decent, respectable woman."

My heart sank. Her mind was made up, and she was strong-willed. But I couldn't lose her now. I said, "You like it at the Bar. N. I think

(*concluded on page* 117)

(*continued from page* 85)

itself from the screen of timber behind the house. Moving slowly and painfully, this man made his open but wholly unobserved way to the rear wall of the house. He paused there, gasping for breath. His breathing quieted finally, but the madness did not diminish in his wide and staring eyes.

Now, he put a leg over a low window sill, seemingly unaware that the glass cut him cruelly, and pulled himself inside. The long rifle he carried wedged itself in the window, and cursing softly, he pulled it clear.

The room was filled with smoke and he began to cough, bending double, retching finally from the violence of his coughing. When this subsided, he opened the door and rushed through into the inferno of searing flame and smoke in the long living room. He saw, dimly through the leaping flame, distorted by heat, the bulky shape of Glen Hocking, the smaller, slighter shape of his daughter.

He heard the girl's scream, heard the dim and persistent shouts of Hocking's crew as they flung open the big front door and dragged the two clear. He flung up his rifle, too late, for as his finger tightened on the trigger, he found he had no target at which to shoot.

Again the fire-poisoned air flooded his lungs, and Eb Lowe went to the floor, racked with coughing and with no will nor strength to drag himself either forward or back. His convulsive finger tightened on the rifle's trigger and a single shot blasted.

Outside, Frank heard this shot, thinking, "Some of Glen's ammunition going off." Using Benson's rifle as a crutch, he hobbled painfully toward the group before the house.

Hocking, unchanged and blaming Frank Shasta for all of this, raised his gun, but Pete Worden, a small and stringy bowlegged man, twisted it viciously from his grasp. He snarled, "You stubborn loco jackass! Who do you think let us out of the bunkhouse? Who do you think killed Utah Benson, an' broke up the raid?"

Hocking cursed and Worden yelled at him, "I quit! I don't mind workin' for a bullheaded man, but I'm hanged if I'll work for a loco one!"

Rose was running toward Frank. Her woolen robe was torn and burned. Her face was black with soot, and her hair singed and touseled. He thought she had never been more beautiful. He tossed away the short rifle he was using for a crutch and leaned on Rose instead until Glen Hocking, sourfaced in unwilling surrender, put his own solid strength beside Frank and helped him toward the bunkhouse.

Anthrax still stalked the range, but after tonight, Frank felt sure there would be a singleness of purpose along Canyon Creek that would, in time, defeat it. Glen Hocking had made the first hard step toward surrender; the second would be easier. Yes, with the blackened embers of his house a grim reminder, the second should be much easier....

THE END

MULE DEAL

(*continued from page* 116)

you like me. No other woman will do for me. I know what you are. You married Phil because he led you to believe that he had money, and at the time it was money you wanted, not affection. He wanted you because you were young and attractive. But any woman young and attractive would have done for him. I'm not that way, Claire." I paused, then said again: "No other woman will do."

She wavered. "Danny, if I could believe that the past wouldn't matter...."

I went to her. I said, "You and I have no past."

I took her in my arms, and I was so strong again that she couldn't break away. She struggled against me, but I held her and after a little while she couldn't help herself. She was pliant in my arms, to my will.

I said, "We'll start making our past," and I knew I had won. ●End

(*continued from page 85*)

they had a quality of shininess.

"You always got to celebrate after a round-up," he said with careful articulation. "It's one of them time-honored customs we got out here; one of them things you got to learn about, Jimmy."

"Well, you should have gone down to Cartwheel, then," Jimmy said again. "I figured you and Julius and I would be enough to keep an eye on things until we load Monday, but with you this way it kind of loads the whole thing onto Julius and me."

Jimmy took his eyes away from Hap and stared along the shining rails of the company track which ran the ten miles from the cowcamp to Cartwheel where it connected with the main line. His eyes followed the painful brilliance from the dead-end storage spur at the rim of a deep water-filled gully back to the switch-point, and beyond to where the switching engine stood without steam near the long line of empty cattle cars. Everything was ready.

The music was a-ringin' in a
dance-hall 'cross the way,
And the dancers was a-swingin'
just as close as they could—

"Hey, cut it out, Hap! That's enough to drive the rattlers nuts."

Hap put the guitar on the ground and stared at it. "That's a nice tune, Jimmy," he said with a tone of injury. "How do you expect to learn 'bout the West less you hear the music? Just about everything's in them songs somewhere. I learned that one in the Rangers."

EVERY TIME Hap sang a song he had an association for it; it was always linked up with a part of his past—a past which was remarkable for its variety, if it was to be believed. He had been everywhere and done everything; he had fought Indians, panned for gold, ridden the Chisolm trail and scouted for Custer—or so he said. But Jimmy was not familiar with any of these things and he could never tell if Hap was telling the truth or not.

Because he felt angry and out of sorts, Jimmy began to goad Hap. "I suppose you've got a song for everything," he said. "I suppose you've even got one for the hangings. Every time the rangers strung a rustler up, I'll bet you got out that guitar and sung him a song."

"Oh, sometimes," Hap said carelessly. "But a hangin' ain't no time for that kind of thing. A hangin's pretty solemn. It's a great waste, too, when you come to think of it, because if the bad man had only thought some he never would have got into it in the first place. Some were pretty smart—or maybe clever is better—but they always made some mistake. I wouldn't be surprised but what them fellers that hit the Santa Fe bank will make some kind of mistake sooner or later, too."

When Hap said that Jimmy became aware of the pinching of the boots once more and he tried to put his mind on Julius, who had gone down to the pens to see about water for the cattle, but then it came back to the recent robbery again. Why the mention of that should make him feel more uncomfortable than he already was he could not surely say, unless it was because the incident seemed to imply an amount of truth and veracity in the themes of the songs which Hap would sing, and which he sometimes took pleasure in poking fun at.

That had been his only form of recreation—that and hearing Hap's stories—since the syndicate had sent him out from Chicago a month ago to supervise the loading of the particular shipment now going through the pens and to get what they referred to as "efficiency" into this out-of-the-way branch of the organization. He generally enjoyed those songs and stories, which he regarded as a kind of mythology peculiar to

the land from which they sprang, but it was somehow disturbing to the sense of worldliness, which he felt a man from Chicago should have, to have their living context confronting him in the form of the bandits from Santa Fe. It was a thing which annoyed him and pricked his self-assurance.

"Well, you've got to cut that out," he said, and now he began to get angry with Hap. "I don't mean the singing so much; I mean you can't tank up like that just because the round-up's done. We've still got to get the last shipment out."

"You sound just like them eastern bosses when you talk like that," Hap said, "and it don't become you none at all. I figured you had the makin's of a good waddy, but when you get hi-falutin' like that I ain't so sure." The old man glanced up at him from beneath the brim of the battered hat, and laughed. "I'll bet them boots're too tight, Jimmy; y'ought to take 'em off awhile."

Jimmy put his hands on his hips and glared into the blue, young eyes. He had a fondness for Hap that was probably not in keeping with the best interests of the syndicate, since the old foreman was the direct opposite of everything the syndicate held to be good and true; but still he had his loyalties to the people he worked for and he couldn't let Hap run all over him.

"I said you got to cut it out, Hap. I don't give a hoot in you-know-where what you do after a round-up, but as long as you're on company time you'll do things my way or not at all. I got full authority on hirings and firings, if you know what I mean."

* *

HAP HAD turned his head again and Jimmy was suddenly aware that Hap was not listening, but was staring off down the single, funneled trail which lofted up the rise into the pocket. His first feeling was one of irritation, but he quelled that because Hap's attitude was studied and attentive, and he followed the old man's gaze into the white blaze of light that glanced from a towering monodnock at the turning of the trail.

Because of this he did not immediately see the three horsemen and it was Hap's lowly muttered, "Vaqueroes," that told him what was coming. Then he heard the measured clop-clop of the many hooves and saw the riders emerging from the light.

As they neared, Hap slid slowly up the side of the building and said softly, "No reatas, Jimmy; and they got their guns tied down." And while this did not mean anything to Jimmy at first he was conscious that something had come into Hap which he did not understand, but which he observed was also possessed by those who were coming toward them. They were stiff and watchful on their horses.

Except for that, which was a characteristic held in common, the riders were as different as any three men could be. The first was tall and lank, the trunk of his body extending high above the head of the pinto pony, and his face was very pale.

This one and the one who trailed him, and who rode a buckskin, were utilitarian in their equipment, and were it not for the great girth of the second man he might have passed anywhere with little but a glance; he wore common levis, scarred boots and a black hat. But his size was arresting and Jimmy realized the horse was also larger than the others, and seemed to ignore the weight atop him.

The third, if last and lesser in size, was the most ornate—a Mexican—and his small, black-clad body was adorned with silver spangles. They shone and sparkled in the sun, with highlights glancing from the encrusted saddle, the tapaderas and from a

pair of large-roweled spurs. His head was like a little ball beneath a high spreading sombrero, and from one wrist there swung a woven leather cuarta.

But the difference in these men ended there, and as Hap stood very still beside him the invisible but persistent quality of caution—and another, that of menace—became more apparent to Jimmy; and he was as conscious of it as Hap when the three dismounted.

The tall man with the pale, hard face looked for a long while at the engine and the cars. The fat one and the Mexican were busy with the heavy saddle bags, and Hap's eyes were flat in his face.

Presently the tall one said, "Any telegraph here?" His eyes were roaming easily around the camp, pausing on the bunkhouse, the rail line and the shack. They lingered on the trail a bit.

Jimmy said, "No," slowly, and waited. He did not know what this was yet, but he did not like the way it had commenced. Hap's manner told him that it was bad, though, and could get worse. "No. No telegraph; what do you want it for?"

The tall man was still staring down the trail and he did not reply; he ignored the question. "Seems quiet up here," he said. "About how we figured. Your boys go down to Cartwheel on the rail, there?"

JIMMY DID not like the way things were going and he hesitated, the strangers seemed to know more about the cow-camp than they ought to. The fat man had the bags slung over his shoulder and he smiled at Jimmy without humor.

"Be nice, sonny; you answer when you're spoke to. You don't want to fool with Silver Jack." The fat man's wide hand rested with significance upon a hand-tooled leather cartridge belt.

"That's all right, Bart," the man called Silver Jack said. "It don't make any difference. What I don't know from watchin' this place I'll find out for myself." He looked at the fat man and the Mexican. "Bart, take the bags into the shack here, and, Quito, get the horses around out of sight and stake 'em out."

The Mexican smiled broadly. "Si, Silver Jack; and I take my saddle?" The Mexican's teeth were very white in the hat's shadow.

"No. You don't take the saddle. We can't bother with it."

"But, Senor! It is beautiful; the dinero I have spent on that saddle!" Quito's voice had the hurt sound of a child's.

"Just leave it where it is," Silver Jack said, and he walked past Jimmy and Hap and into the shack. The fat man motioned Jimmy and Hap in, and followed. Jimmy obeyed without knowing why.

Inside, Silver Jack sat in the chair at the desk and stared at the telephone. He pushed his hat back and Jimmy saw his hair was prematurely white. Looking at him, Jimmy felt boiling resentment.

"Say," he said suddenly, "what is this anyway? Who do you think you are, busting in this way? This property belongs to the Continental Cattle Company; what are you doing on it?"

Hap plucked at his sleeve, but Jimmy shook the fingers loose. Silver Jack smiled. "You got spirit, sonny. That's nice. We won't be here long. We just came up to get a ride."

Jimmy's mind went blank. "Ride? What kind of a ride?"

"On your engine out there. I figure to learn how to run it. In case you don't know it there ain't but two ways out of this cul-de-sac; the way we came up—which may not be a healthy road for long—and your railroad down to Cartwheel. It's only ten miles on the rail, but it's forty by the trail. That's a big difference. Be-

sides, I always had a hanker to ride one of them things."

Jimmy said, "Say...you can't do that," and then stopped. The wide hand of the man named Bart had inexplicably produced a long-barreled pistol and Jimmy knew quite suddenly that he was host to the bandits of Santa Fe. Hap drew a deep breath and let it out slowly as the gun did not rise.

Then Jimmy turned his head carefully and watched Silver Jack wind the cords of the telephone around his hand and pull them from the wall box. It was a company line, and Jimmy's only link with the outside world.

* *

WHEN SILVER JACK took Hap out to look at the engine, Bart sat in the chair with the saddle bags on the desk, and Jimmy eased down on the floor with his back to the wall and stared through the door. It was too much to assimilate all at once.

He had heard about things like this —about people like this—and he had read about them, but he had never, even when the syndicate had sent him out here, considered in the remotest way that he might ever meet up with their likes, or become involved with them to the extent of losing some very costly company property. The rustling of the syndicate-owned engine implied that, and there did not seem to be a thing that he could do about it.

He was baffled and surprised and he was resentful. He was baffled and surprised because he was caught in a situation which was clearly beyond his experience and for which he had nothing to refer to for solution. And he was resentful because his small province of effort and endeavor had been so crudely violated; a thing which left him helpless and impotent. And he was somehow resentful with Hap, as well, because it gave credence to the things which he had found amusing in the old man's songs and tales; and this anger was heightened now because the one time when Hap might conceivably have helped, he was too tight and addle-pated to do it.

"The old guy looks like he was havin' a fair time of it before we come up in here," Bart said presently. "Smelled like it, too. You keep the stuff in here?"

Jimmy turned his head and looked sidewise at the fat man. He was squatting heavily on the chair. His hat was off and there was a deep crease in his forehead where it had been pulled down; his face was meaty and red and his one hand never left the gun-belt.

"There isn't any around here," Jimmy said. "I don't have any." He said this sullenly and he saw Bart's eyes draw narrow.

"You don't want to be like that," he said softly. "It's been a dusty ride, and a disagreeable two-three days waitin' up in the hills to come down here. Ain't right nor hospitable to refuse a man a drink." Bart's hand moved to the butt of the gun.

Jimmy stared at it with a compelling fascination and cursed inside him. This thing was way beyond anything he had ever known before. He would like to spring from the wall and smash the fat man's face with his own gun butt, but he knew he would never make it to his feet alive. Bart's eyes told him that without words.

"It isn't in here," he said quietly. "Hap keeps it somewhere; maybe in the bunkhouse. I don't know. If I could find the bottle I'd break it to hell and gone."

Fat Bart laughed. "You don't sound happy, kid. You sound like you got a beef of some kind. Maybe you ought to have a pull or two at that thing yourself."

Absurdly, Jimmy did not resent this, but found himself wanting to say something about the trouble with

Hap. But something in the window near the door checked the impulse; he saw Julius coming from the cattle pens. Julius was big and awkward and he walked the close-spaced ties with bad balance and with arms flapping and thrusting into the air at odd angles. He was coming toward the shack unknowing and unarmed, and Jimmy wanted to stand and yell at him to run for cover or for help—though it was the good Lord's secret where he might find some of the latter.

But he could not do that and agony crept through his body as the cowhand neared them in the white light of the sun. The feeling surged through him, and then somewhere behind he heard the sound of singing and he thought perhaps that Hap was there and might be able to pass the warning. But it was not Hap's voice, and presently he saw the Mexican move before him in the doorway; and heard the voice trail off as Quito spotted Julius.

Julius paused and lowered his arms and hunched his shoulders forward. Jimmy watched this and he watched the Mexican go loose in his whole body and saw his fingers flex and drift to his sides. He saw the ripple move through Julius and saw him reach quick with one hand for a loose rock, and lunge toward Quito.

And he saw the sun-bolt strike the shining silver barrel of the level pistol and heard the high crash of sound as the gun fired. He saw the Mexican's smooth, brown face and the incredibly white teeth bared in a smile against the shadow of the hat—like a delighted little boy. He saw Julius' awkward body lose control and stability and the white dust spurting in impact as he pitched forward on the ground.

That time Jimmy made it to his feet without thought and he was amazed when he felt the planks beneath his boots. But he did not make it to the door and he heard the faint wheeze of exertion behind him before he felt the cold and stunning barrel laid along his head. He felt nothing when he struck the floor.

* *

SLOWLY he came alive and he knew he had been gone a long time; the doorway was dusky with reflected luminescence of the dying day, and the oil lamp had been suspended from the rafters. The three men had found boxes somewhere and were hunched around the desk playing cards, and he was somehow surprised that they were still there. Hap was on the floor near the window with the guitar and a bottle; he was very high again and Jimmy became ill when he looked at him. It was insane and macabre with Julius outside as he was.

"Ah, the young senor 'as come around," someone said and Jimmy tried to focus on the table. He was half propped against the wall and every motion was one of agony. His head rang like a mission bell.

The three men were looking at him and the Mexican was smiling. Fat Bart grinned across the fan of cards and gestured with a bottle.

"Didn't mean to hit you so hard, sonny, but you got careless. You want a drink now? You ought to be about ripe for it; after I went and found it for you."

Jimmy did not reply; he could not. He blinked in the harshness of the light reflector and thought of Julius. He looked at Hap, who was fumbling with the guitar and mumbling in a sing-song way.

I'm a howler from the prairies of the West.
If you want to die of terror look at me
I'm chain-lightning—if I ain't, may I be blessed
I'm the snorter of the boundless prairie.

Hap seemed to have memory trou-

ble after that line because he strummed absently and grinned. Jimmy would gladly have risked another gun-blow to get at him—to jam the guitar over the top of his head—but he knew he was unable to move that far in a hurry; and there did not seem to be anything near him that he could throw.

Quito had removed his high sombrero and his greased hair shone with a soft patina as he turned and smiled at Hap.

"Old one, you 'av the voice of the lark. Sing me that one again." Quito was thick in his speech and he was very happy. His face was like a wreath of autumn leaves. There was no crevice where the smile did not penetrate. "Sing me that one again, old *mesteno,* and we'll 'av a drink together."

Silver Jack did not look up from his cards. "Shut up and watch the game, Quito. You ain't havin' no more to drink."

"Por Dios," Quito said, and his eyes were wide and there was injury in his voice. "But we 'av all this money and we should be 'appy tonight; there is a time for fiesta."

Jimmy thought of the horses they were leaving and he thought it must be a great deal of money indeed they had gotten from the bank.

"I said you ain't havin' no more," Silver Jack said. "We'll do our celebratin' when we get clear of this place and not before."

Quito's small dark face fell into a pout, but Quito did not argue. Silver Jack looked at Hap and pursed his lips.

"How much longer's it goin' to take to get steam into that thing? It's been two hours now. We can't sit around here forever."

Hap picked at the strings and looked with glazed eyes at the lamp. "Ought to be any time now," he said.

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"Ought to be any old time at all. That old engine ought to have a big head of hot air any minute now." Hap grinned at the Mexican. "I got a nice song about an engine; a real nice one." He struck a chord, and Jimmy wondered if Hap was as plastered as he looked.

A cowboy lay down on a bar-room floor,
Having drunk so much he could drink no more;
And he fell asleep with a troubled brain
To dream that he rode on a hell-bound train.

The Mexican's face was one of rapture as Hap trailed off. His eyes were wide in simple and uncomplicated pleasure and he laughed happily. He reached for the bottle again, but Silver Jack slammed his fist on the narrow, brown wrist. Hap stopped strumming.

"I said you had enough, damn you, Quito. I said you had enough, and I meant it. We got one unplanned killin' on our hands here now, and I ain't goin' to see you get crazy by any booze."

THERE WAS something in the small room and Jimmy could feel it. He could feel death and murder very close, because he and Hap had been witness to the killing and he knew that had just occurred to all of them. Quito's face went bleak beneath the lamp, and Silver Jack drew back in the chair and looked carefully at Hap and Jimmy.

In the corner Hap made a halting, grotesque motion and began to push himself up the wall. His boots were spread wide on the floor and the guitar hung around his neck by a frayed cord. He staggered against the wall, then leaned on it, breathing through thick lips.

"Where you think you're goin'?" Silver Jack said quietly.

Hap stared stupidly at the desk and worked his mouth.

"I don't feel...so good...kind o' loaded. Feel like some air...ought to git some...air...nice, fresh... air."

He commenced to waver along the wall and Silver Jack stood up and lowered his hand to the butt of his gun. "Git back where you were, boozer," he said with malice. "Git back where you were, or you'll never have to think of your stomach again." Silver Jack's face was nearly transparent in the hard light.

It was very quiet and there was no sound. There was not even the heavy breathing of Bart. Hap stared as though he did not understand and then his knees began to buckle.

"He's goin' to cave in," Bart said suddenly into the stillness; and Hap folded slowly onto the floor and lay on his side. His throat made retching sounds.

"Gawd, he's goin' to heave, too." Silver Jack said and he came to Hap's side and prodded him with his boot. Hap did not move, but the sound in his throat continued in spasms. Silver Jack reached down and took Hap beneath his arms. "We got to get him out o' here. We can't let him get sick all over the floor; c'mon, Bart."

Jimmy watched Bart take Hap's legs and when he looked at Quito he saw the Mexican standing near the desk. The round face was smiling at him and his gun was leveled at his stomach. The dark hand was unwavering and the barrel did not move until Bart and Silver Jack had thrown Hap outside and had returned to the room.

"That's enough of that, damn it, Quito," Silver Jack said. "He ain't goin' nowhere; and now, because of what you already done, we'll likely have to fix him, too. And the other one."

"I am sorry," Quito said, and he put the gun away. "I am sorry for

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what I have done. It will be too bad for the old one; he has such fine singing." Quito shrugged in honest dejection. "It is too bad."

Silver Jack stood with his hands on his hips and looked around the room. "Well, we'd better git goin'. He said the steam ought to be up by now, so we'd better be headin' on. I'm goin' to git some other duds out of that bunkhouse and put 'em in the engine. We'll change before we get to Cartwheel. You two get them bags tied down and wait for me; I'll be back."

Bart said, "What about these guys? We goin' to leave 'em? They been lookin' at us for nearly three hours; they ain't likely to forget our faces when the law comes around."

Silver Jack stared down at Jimmy and Jimmy felt cold. It was no good to go this way, and yet there was nothing he could do. He would have no decent chance against even one of them; and with the three standing with their hands only inches from their smooth and slippery holsters, he would be dead before he could move.

"You won't get very far with this," he said. "They're goin' to associate the killings here with you; your rap will be just that much worse. Maybe they know you came up here; maybe they're behind you now."

Something enigmatic passed through Silver Jack's eyes, and was gone. Bart edged closer and curled his lip and Quito was unsmiling.

Silver Jack became impatient. "First things first. We'll git around to them when the time comes. Just do like I say 'til I git back. And I don't want to hear no gun-shootin' while I'm gone."

All three were looking at Jimmy and Jimmy knew there was not much time. It was a matter of minutes now, and not many of those. Silver Jack would go to the engine and then he would come back and it would all be over.

The three men were smiling as though they understood very well what was going through his mind. Jimmy smiled back, if mechanically, and spat on the floor in front of him. And then, incredibly, the high, cold silence of the night was ripped by gunfire.

* *

THERE WERE two shots, one near the point where the line passed out of the cul-de-sac and the other to the rear of the shack. They were close-spaced, as though the first had given the signal for the second, and the tearing sound of wood trailed the shooting as a bullet passed through the building.

Silver Jack swore and as he smashed the lamp into darkness, Jimmy caught a last glimpse of Bart, slinging the bags to his shoulder, and of Quito, slack-faced with the fear of surprise, clawing for his silver-barrled gun.

Then it was quickly black and Jimmy summoned his strength to roll along the floor to the wall beneath the window. The faint, rock-reflected light of outside starshine grew and presently he saw the three men moving carefully across the planked floor.

There was one dead, timeless moment when the outer light struck a pistol barrel, which commenced to search around the room, and then he heard Silver Jack's hissed, "None 'o that, Quito. Damn it, we got to keep unheard and unseen."

When the three forms filled the door and were gone Jimmy waited only until he was sure they were away from the stoop before he cat-footed across the floor and slipped into the dry dust of the ground. He strained his eyes for Hap, but he was not visible and Jimmy knew there was no time to look if he was going to do anything to stop the desperados. He had no concrete idea in mind, but he was hot with anger and he re-

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membered a hunting carbine he had left in the bunkhouse near the siding.

It would not be simple and direct, though, for presently he saw a red streak down by the dead-end spur near the gully and heard the shooting fill the pocket. There was another solitary shot behind him again, and to the left, but he did not see the flash; and then the black void was laced with it as the desperados returned the fire blindly.

Jimmy crouched low and crept through the dust until he saw the glowing fire-box and saw the bandits climbing up the iron ladders to the cab. There was gunfire slatting in clanging ricochets from the boiler and the platework and he dug in lower as he worked along the siding toward the bunkhouse.

It took a long time to find the carbine and the ammunition in the darkness; and he was fumbling with the loading when he felt the slight vibration of the floor and heard the harsh exhaust of the engine as the throttle was opened jerkily and the wheels turned.

The engine had already put a space between it and the cattle cars when Jimmy came outside and sighted at the dark bulk moving on the dim rails.

It was gathering speed rapidly as it approached the switch and then he saw the cherry glow silhouette the coal and tender as the fire door was opened; he saw the shadows of the moving men in the cab and he saw one groping up the coal and saw the flash of a gun being fired. The bullet buzzed near and he fired quick from a standing position and the figure rose slightly and tumbled off the tender.

He commenced to run down the track and then everything became confused and a little unbelievable. He could not see the tracks ahead anymore, but he knew where they should be, and he saw that the engine was veering slightly, and then greatly, and he knew it had left the main line at

the switch and was heading toward the gully. It was traveling at high speed, the brakes shrieking in futility.

He stopped running and drew his breath in and as the engine struck the bumper and went on into the gully the boiler exploded and the enormous sound and light filled the whole of the pocket and pressed down on him from the high granite which faded into the stars. It rocked from one scarred wall to another, until it died slowly and there was no more sound anywhere at all.

JIMMY FOUND the body of Quito, the child-like Mexican, crumpled into the ground near the track. He was very dead and he was not smiling any more. Further on, at the switch, he found another, but this one was on his hands and knees and making sounds of lamentation. It was Hap; his one hand pressed a pistol into the dirt.

"Oh, glory be, I'm done for sure. I'm a sick man, and oh, a sin-ful one."

Jimmy reached down in the darkness and felt the old man's body. There were no wounds, but he had been sick all over the switch; and Jimmy commenced to realize just what Hap had done.

"You turned the switch, Hap. You got out here and turned the switch." He was very gentle helping Hap to his feet.

"The switch," Hap said. "Gawd, yes, I turned the switch and sent 'em all to hell. Oh, glory, I'm a sick man, Jimmy. I never drunk so much before; not even when I fit the Indians."

"I thought you'd passed out cold," Jimmy said. "And the others did, too. They never would have tossed you out otherwise."

"I tried to act worse than I was," Hap groaned. "When they got talkin' about killin' us off I knew I had to get goin'. But I guess maybe I was

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worse than I thought. I had to figure some way of gettin' out, and I guess I overdid it. But, like I said, them kind always forgets somethin'; I guess they didn't remember a switch could work both ways. I figured if I could get 'em out 'o there all excited in a hurry it might slip their minds."

"Well, it worked, Hap; you did fine. If you keep getting ideas like that out of your bottle, I can't complain."

Hap moaned. "Oh, glory, no; I'm done forever. I've had my fill!"

They had come to the gully and Jimmy could see the awkward, twisted cant of the tender in the water. The engine was not visible, but there was debris scattered all over in the coals and steaming puddles on the ground.

"It's too bad about that engine," Jimmy said. "All blown up."

"Well, when that Silver Jack took me out to study it I thought I could maybe give him the wrong instructions; but then I got to thinkin' that might not work and he'd kill us for sure. So then I figured it'd be best to maybe try and pile 'em up."

"There was nothing else to do," Jimmy said "You did right."

"It ain't goin' to cost the company nothin', so there ain't no worry there. Besides the reward there's the insurance on the engine. Wouldn't be surprised but what them Eastern bosses'll be plumb happy about the whole thing. The reward's *plenty* big."

"Guess we better get back," Jimmy said. "Sounded to me like that posse started shootin' about the same time you did, Hap, and they'll likely be looking for us."

Hap pushed his pistol into the tops of his sagging pants and leaned on Jimmy's shoulder, laughing. "There ain't no posse up in here, Jimmy. All that shootin' was only me. That's just one more thing Silver Jack and his boys forgot—and it appears like you did, too—they forgot Echo Wells didn't get its name for nothin'."

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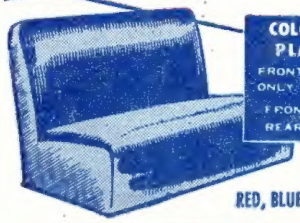

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Now at last you can have smart seat covers that will protect your upholstery and add distinction to your car at amazingly low cost. These remarkable seat covers are tailored of miracle plastic in rich, lustrous colors. New snap-on action holds them tight. FITS ALL CARS. Color-fast. Will not fade or shrink. Waterproof, stainproof, greaseproof. Resists burns. Cleans easily with damp cloth.

FLEXIBLE SUN VISOR

Approved by: Police, Safety Bureaus, Insurance Companies, Truck Drivers.

ONLY $1.00

Like looking through fine sun glasses! Stops glare without reducing vision. No tools, no bolts, no screws, no glue! Adheres permanently to the inside of your windshield. You'll wonder how you ever drove without it!

Lifelike ZEBRA
FRONT ONLY $3.69
FRONT AND REAR $6

Simulated LEOPARD
FRONT ONLY $2.98
FRONT AND REAR $5

New Miracle AUTOMATIC AUTO WASHER
3 FEET LONG!

Special Offer $3.95 De Luxe Model, 4 foot long with shut-off valve, 4.98.

R. V. REED, noted Cadillac Sales Manager says: "It's like magic. Cars practically wash themselves."

Attach this miracle washer to your garden hose and watch it float dirt and grime off your car in less than 10 minutes. A few washings will repay its small cost. New model has features never before incorporated in one washer: Luster-tone plastic head defies breakage . . . rust-proof aluminum handle gives reach without weight . . . all brass couplings last a lifetime. Extra large brush of soft Marlon bristles will never mat, shed, or tangle. Gently soaks, scrubs, washes and rinses automatically.

STOP SPENDING MONEY ON CAR WASHING

Luster-tone plastic head can't break. Soft Marlon Bristles can't mat or tangle. Rust-proof aluminum handle gives reach without weight.

AMAZING New WATCH with MECHANICAL BRAIN

- It "Remembers"
- It Tells Time
- It Tells Date

Included 1 year Guarantee and Lifetime Certificate of Service

Measures Speed • Measures Distance • Records Up to 12 Hours • OVER 40 QUALITY FEATURES.

Precision Jeweled. Imported Swiss Movement. Accurate. Dependable. Push-Button Stop and Start. Red Sweep-Second Hand. Unbreakable Crystal. Triple Chrome Plated Case. Shock Resistant. Nite-Vue Radium Glow Dial. Anti-Magnetic. Times Shop work. Times Photography. Times Sports. Times Races. Times Lab. work. Times Planes. Expansion Band included.

Compare It at $50.00
SPECIAL OFFER $8.95
Plus 90c Fed. Tax

SEND NO MONEY—MAIL THIS COUPON

YOUNG PRODUCTS, DEPT. 468
2605 ELMHURST AVENUE
DETROIT 6, MICHIGAN

Please Send The Following Items:

AUTO SEAT COVERS

Make of Car_____
☐ 2-Door ☐ 4-Door ☐ Coupe
Other: _____
Circle Color: RED BLUE GREEN
☐ SOLID TONE ☐ PLAID
☐ LEOPARD ☐ ZEBRA
☐ *Front Only* ☐ *Front & Rear*

☐ WALKIE-TALKIE
☐ AUTO SUN VISOR
☐ AUTO WASHER
☐ DELUXE AUTO WASHER
☐ CALENDAR WATCH
☐ COMPASS WATCH

NAME_____
ADDRESS_____
CITY_____ STATE_____

☐ Send items checked. I will pay Postman Plus Postage.

SAVE MORE!

☐ I want to save postage. I am enclosing full payment.

100% GUARANTEE
Your Money Promptly Refunded If You Are Not Delighted

New...Guaranteed WRIST WATCH with Jeweled COMPASS

• TELLS DIRECTION
• TELLS TIME

The most practical watch ever devised for OUTDOOR MEN! Guaranteed accurate timekeeper with a dependable compass right on the dial. Check your direction at a glance. Features gleaming chrome-plated case, non-shatter crystal and embossed genuine leather strap. Ruggedly built for rough, outdoor treatment! Order today while this introductory low price lasts.

Special! Introductory Offer

COMPARE AT $25 ANYWHERE! $7.95 Plus 80c Fed. Tax

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